Born from the Earth

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Born from the Earth

by venusm

Summary

Tony Stark's born an omega in a world where that means he's supposed to follow certain social rules. He becomes Iron Man anyway: Fuck biology.

If only his biology (and the world) would quit fucking him back.

Note: This is a multi-pairing fic; this world works very differently; not all pairings will be tagged until work is complete. Read with caution.
Rot13.com to decode spoiler: Obgu Fgrir naq Gbal unir frk jvgu bguref orsber trggvat gbtrgure. Gbal naq Fgrir unir ybgf bs frk, whfg gur gjb bs gurz, naq n qrrc ebznagvp eryngvbafuvc, ohg svany cnvevat vf Gbal Fgnex/Fgrir Ebtref/Bevtvany punenpgre, sbe pbzcyrk ernfbaf.

Born from the Earth is currently on hiatus while I finish some life stuff. It will return February 2018. I have about 17 chapters written, but they need editing before posting.

Notes

Important: I have chosen not to post specific warnings for this fic. This story is my take on certain aspects of omega-verse fic. It will include non-con, dub-con, alcohol/drug use/abuse, etc. The only thing I promise is that it does not contain major character death and will have a happy ending. Read with care, please.

Secondly, I have invented or expanded a lot of biology/social mores for this verse. If there is interest, I'll post my (probably boring) world creation notes as a separate chapter. Some of my omegaverse works differently than traditional a/b/o.

Last:
Na = unmarried omega, similar to Miss
Sa = married omega, similar to Mr or Mrs
This society does not differentiate between omega genders, only omega marital status. Make of that what you will.

Chapter 1

When Tony Stark is eight, he's playing behind the couch with his circuit board, two plastic dinosaurs, and a miniature erector set. He's just managed to get the tiny crane to lift the stegasaurus from the T-Rex's clutches when he hears a low laugh.

Looking up, Tony sees his dad's friend Obie.

"Whatcha doing, my boy?" Obie asks.

"Making a crane," Tony says, staring at him. "I think I need a better hoist rope, though." He'd used some twine he'd found in the kitchen, because his dad had shooed him from the workshop.

Obie walks around the couch and crouches down, inspecting the crane. "You should try something smoother. See how the ragged edges are getting caught? How about I bring you some high-tensile nylon cord?"

Tony is rapt. He'd noticed the problem, but his materials were limited. "Yeah! And I need a better latticed boom or Steggie will--"

Obie laughs. He's leaned closer, and Tony thinks for a moment that Obie *sniffed him*. Adults are so weird. Tony'd already had his bath tonight, jeez.

"I'll see what I can do," Obie says. "Maybe you should have a few dinosaurs to go with this whole building operation. How about a triceratops?"

Tony has a triceratops in his playchest, and he's actually more interested in the high tensile nylon. Before he can try wheedling for the advanced motorized erector set (it would be so cool), his mother appears. She looks at Tony, then at Obie. Her mouth gets pinched, the way it does when his dad has a whiskey at lunchtime. Tony isn't sure why--he's allowed to play behind the couch so long as he's careful and doesn't get motor oil on the carpet.

"Maria!" Obie says. His voice is kind of loud. He wraps an arm around Tony, cradling him against his side. Obie smells kind of like dad. Shop chemicals, whiskey, cologne, that other scent. "I was just talking to Tony about his dinosaurs."

His mom smiles at Obie, but it's a weird smile. Maybe she's sick. "I hope he hasn't been boring you with stories about them."

"Not at all. He's very creative."

Which is weird, because Tony isn't. Not like his friend Sandy. She has a whole life history for each dinosaur, with special names and family and everything. Tony doesn't really care, but Sandy is nice and she let him rewire the elevator in her Barbie house so it worked for real.

"He's also up past his bedtime. Come on, Tony. Your dad's guests will be arriving soon. Chop, chop."

Tony wants to argue, because usually mom lets him stay behind the couch so long as he's quiet. Her voice has the 'I mean it' undertone, though, so he just packs up Steggie and T-Rex. "Can I take my crane?" If the party gets going, Tony can sneak out of bed and work on it.

"Not tonight, sweetie." She wraps an arm around his shoulder, holding him next to her as they go around the couch.

Obie is smiling, and he calls, "Goodnight, Tony my boy!"

"'Night," Tony says, over his shoulder.

His mom tucks him into bed and reads him two extra chapters of their bedtime book. Tony listens to her voice and thinks about the crane's boompoint.

The next day, the family driver takes him on a four hour trek to The Miss Peters Academy for Talented Youth.

When they leave, Tony climbs up on the seat so he can look out the back window of the car. Howard is holding a glass of scotch and he's got a cigarette in his mouth. His dad waves cheerfully, looking happy, then goes back into the house.

His mom looks tired and kind of sick. She's standing on their gravel drive in her sock feet, and her hair is kind of scraggly. She stays there, waving, until the car goes around a turn in the road.

*

Tony isn't sure what to expect at the school. His parents hadn't said much before putting him in the car. They drive into the country for a long long time. There are cows, which is kind of worrying. Finally, the car stops at a huge wrought iron gate. A guard comes out and talks to the family driver. He looks carefully at Tony in the backseat, but he smiles. The driver gets out and shows the guard the car trunk, and then the gates swing open. Tony thinks that's pretty cool. He's seen other mechanized gates, but this one is as big as the gate at Fort Bragg when he visited with dad one time. No barbed wire on top of the fence, but Tony sees some sparkly-looking filament. Maybe it's electric.

Tony peers through the windows, but it's boring. Lots of green lawn, some playground sets, some sports fields. There's a bunch of buildings, but they're also boring. Old fashioned brick, white columns, discrete utility sheds to hold the air conditioning. Tony had been hoping for something modern.

A woman comes down the steps in front of the biggest building. She's wearing dark blue pants and some kind of warm-looking sweater.

"Hello, Tony, welcome."

Tony stares at her. "How did you know my name?"

"Your parents told me you were coming." She crouches down on her heels so she's eye level. Tony's had adults do that before, usually when they want to ask him about dad's secret inventions. She doesn't seem like that, though.

"Huh," Tony says.

"My name is Violet Anderson. You may call me Na Anderson." She offers a hand.

Tony shakes her hand warily. She doesn't *look* like an omega.

"I know this is all pretty confusing." Na Anderson is still crouched down.

Tony doesn't say anything. His dad has a lot of opinions about how Starks are supposed to behave. Starks never admit fear. Tony's still pretty confused, though, because Na Anderson really looks nothing like the omegas Tony's met. They'd all worn fancy clothes with weird hair and lots of makeup. Most of them seemed to be married to senators or research division heads. They'd all smelled not just bonded but Taken with a capital T. Still, Tony's nose is pretty good, so maybe if he can concentrate on her scent, he can figure this stuff out. Tony thinks Na Anderson smells a little like his dad's superficial scent after a day in the workshop at home. Coffee, chemicals, ink, old books. There's none of that sharp smell of alpha, though. Tony wonders if maybe Na Anderson just doesn't have a scent.

He edges closer, sniffing as sneakily as possible. She's still talking, but Tony is ignoring it. He doesn't care about boring stuff like educational opportunities or student to teacher ratio.

Tony is just a breath away from Na Anderson now, and he's frowning. There is a smell to her, he realizes. Nothing like dad's research assistant Todd, who smells kind of like clean floors. Nothing like Obie's nose-tingling lemony smell. Nothing like his dad, whose alpha smell is a lot like scotch. Not even like Senator Wilson, who is a nice lady, but who has kind of a high-note smell like his mom's expensive perfume.

Tony sniffs carefully, forgetting to be sneaky about it. Na Anderson smells earthy, like sunwarmed rock.

It's nice.

Na Anderson is watching him. "This is a special school," she says quietly.

Tony freezes. His dad has sent him here because he's not an alpha. He's heard dad talking about it at poker night. How some of them told dad he could try again, since Tony was just an omega. "Because I'm just an omega."

Na Anderson doesn't look away. "There are no 'just' omegas at this school, Na Stark."

Tony looks down at the driveway. It's the concrete kind, and he focuses on the gritty surface. It's clean, not like New York sidewalks. There's no black circles where gum got dropped and then attracted dirt. It's all plain soft gray.

"Did you use a sealant on this?" he asks, because sometimes adults will let him get away with changing the subject if he gives them a science-based question wrapped in a compliment. "It's really clean and there's no cracks."

Na Anderson touches the scratchy concrete, rubbing it gently, like she's considering the question seriously.

Tony mimics her. It's rougher than he expected, and he pulls his hand back. He sniffs his fingers experimentally. It dusty, but there's no petro-chemical smell. "Doesn't smell like paint," Tony offers.

"There isn't any paint smell," Na Anderson agrees, sniffing her own fingers. She takes a tiny paper envelope from her baggy sweater pocket. "Have you got a clean sampling pick?"

Tony blinks at her, shakes his head.

"Ah well." She pulls a pen from her back pocket and uses the end to scrape at the concrete. It doesn't work very well, but Na Anderson keeps at it.

Tony's a little confused about this whole weird situation with the school, getting dumped by his parents, the weird way Na Anderson is dressed, the way the driver just unpacked his stuff and took off. But he understands science and he understands sampling, and that pen is never going to get a good sample.

Tony crouches down next to her and offers the screwdriver he keeps in his pocket at all times. It has fifteen different heads that live in the base and it's a lot smaller than dad's giant ones. His mom's friend Eileen had given it to him for his birthday last year, and it has his initials carved into the red handle. AES. The adults had all found it pretty funny, for some reason. "Not gonna be true for all that long, Eileen. Should have waited to have it engraved," one of them joked. Tony hadn't really gotten it, because he's a Stark. He's stuck with that name forever.

Na Anderson takes the screwdriver, making a happy sound under her breath. Tony's made that sound himself, sometimes, when he figures out a problem and sees a solution. She's flipped out the base and pulled out one of the heads Tony never uses. It only takes her a second to get some samples of the concrete now.

Tony watches her. Na Anderson takes scrapings from three different places, and she puts each scraping into its own little envelope.

"We can get more if the deviations are too far," she tells him.

When she hands the screwdriver back, Tony discovers she's put the phillips head back on, like it was before. He tucks it carefully into his jeans pocket. "Thank you."

"No, thank you." Na Anderson gives the concrete a last longing look. "I guess we'd better do that tour. But we can end it in the lab, check these out."

"OK," Tony says.

When Na Anderson takes his hand, Tony lets her.

*

The tour takes a long time. It's a big school. There are seven main buildings and a bunch of auxiliary structures. The Lower School dorm is where Tony gets to live. Na Anderson is his floor mother, she says, which Tony thinks is kind of funny. She's the least mom-like person he's ever met.

Tony gets his own room, but he has to share a bathroom with everyone else. His room is already decorated, but Tony expected that. All his dad's houses are decorated. This one has warm red walls and big windows, lots of oak furniture, and a rug in abstract patterns of red, black, and gold.

Na Anderson shows him the two sets of bookshelves. Only one shelf has books. Tony is drawn to them. Introduction to the Principles of Mathematics--ooh. Tony skips Reading and Composition Vol 1 and 2. Borrrrrrring. There's a book called Everyday Experiments: a User-Friendly Guide to the Practical Sciences that looks kind of cool, even if it does have an orange cover. Maybe this school isn't going to completely suck.

The next book is weird, though. Our Omega Bodies. Tony wrinkles his nose. It's not a thin picture book, like the really embarassing book his mom had given him after he'd asked a couple of perfectly reasonable questions. Her book had weird fluffy pink clouds on the cover and talked about how love makes people want to have babies and how beautiful it is when that happens. Tony knows it's all bullshit, because his dad's friend Reeve has two omegas and they've never had a single kid. Reeve just likes to show up at parties in a tux with an omega on each arm.

Na Anderson is still watching him. Tony puts Our Omega Bodies back on the shelf. It's heavy, heavier than Introduction to the Principle of Mathematics, even, and it doesn't look like a kids book.

Tony grabs A Primer of the Visual Arts and starts flipping through it. "Art's pretty stupid."

Na Anderson doesn't take the bait, which is just unfair. Adults love to yell at him, and he's being purposefully obnoxious. Maybe he should try again.

"We believe in evidence based medicine here," she says.

Tony blinks. What?

"Part of our charter is to provide you with the scientific information you need to make decisions about your own body and your life."

That sounds a lot like what his dad calls liberal bullshit. Tony grabs the math book and clutches it to his chest. He shouldn't reply, but he's never been good at keeping his mouth shut. "I bet the alphas here don't have an Our Alpha Bodies book."

Na Anderson just takes the omega textbook and sits down on the floor. "There are no alphas here."

"What?" Tony is staring.

"Research indicates that mixed-sex type classrooms are poor learning environments for omegas."

"Oh my god," Tony hisses, "this is another one of those you poor little omegas can't possibly handle the hard hard math. Don't worry your widdle head about--"

Na Anderson just talks over him, voice still calm. "Numerous studies indicate that in a mixed type environment, teacher attention and classroom resources are unfairly applied. Omegas are called on sixty percent less often than their beta or alpha counterparts. Their homework is often graded too leniently, too harshly, or not at all. When working on group projects, omegas often do more than their share of the work and yet receive less credit for it. Despite showing leadership or academic skills, teachers frequently pass over talented omega students in favor of alpha students during after school programs."

Tony is just staring at her. The math book feels heavy and clumsy in his hands. He's thinking about the Math-a-Thon at his old school. His team had six kids, and he'd done most of the problem sets. When they'd gotten their scores back, the alpha, Sarah, had gotten fifty extra credit points for leading their team. The other kids had gotten twenty to thirty extra credit points, and the teacher had put lots of interesting commentary on the math problems on their answer sheets. Tony had been given twenty five points for participation. The teacher had put a smiley face on his answer sheet, and she'd made some comments about how helpful it had been to the team that he'd taken their notes and re-written their proofs so they were easier to read in his neat printing. She'd hoped that he'd enjoyed participating, and she'd suggested that he might want to join the upcoming debate camp. The debate coach was looking for a charming omega who could bring out the competive streak in his debators.

"At Miss Price's Academy," Na Anderson says, "we only take omega students. You're not here to help alphas or betas, Tony. You're here to learn for yourself."

Na Anderson looks so serious. Her short hair is kind of fluffy and wind-mussed, and she isn't wearing any makeup. She reminds him of one of dad's scientists, stuck in a basement lab somewhere working on a project and forgetting what day it is.

"Did you go here?" Tony asks. Suddenly he really wants to know.

"No," she says. "I didn't attend a school."

"Everybody goes to school," Tony scoffs. "If you skip, you get in big trouble." He's had that drilled into him many times.

She smiles, but she looks kind of sad. "I was from a conservative family, Tony."

"My dad's a conversative," Tony says. "I went to school."

Na Anderson looks like she wants to say something about his dad. Tony leans closer, interested. All she says is, "Hmm." Tony's disappointed.

She gives him the rest of the tour then, showing him the particle accelator they're building in one of the science classes. Tony isn't all that interested in the fine arts building, with its grand pianos and painting studios, its mirrored dance room and its theater in the round. Na Anderson hauls him up the last flight of steps, though, and insists on showing him the drawing studio. There are drafting tables lined up in neat rows, which Tony thinks is pretty boring, really, but then he sees the schematic up on the chalkboard. Its the interior view of an engine.

"You need to improve your drawing skills if you're going to register your patents or expect other people to build according to your specifications."

Tony is still staring, rapt, at the engine parts on that chalkboard. Someone had drawn it *freehand*, in *chalk*, and Tony wants to see the engine from another view--from the top down, or the bottom up, zoom in and out, maybe.

Na Anderson just lets him look for a while, lets him get close to the board. Doesn't even protest when he runs his finger just above the fuel line.

"OK," he says at last. "I guess I can learn to draw."

*

School isn't so bad here. Tony gets to learn as much math and physics as wants, and Na Anderson turns out to be in charge of the engineering department. Tony's old school hadn't even had a specific engineering department.

There are classes Tony likes (physics, shop, math) and classes Tony finds boring (reading, social studies, history) and classes that Tony doesn't like to think too much about (omega studies, deportment, personal development).

The kids in his dorm house are OK, mostly. Tony finds out that Melody, who has the room next to his, is some kind of sports prodigy. She runs track and plays basketball and loves karate movies. Tony ends up helping her out in the gym sometimes, when she wants to try out some of the karate moves she's seen on TV. He spends a lot of time with bruises in weird places, but it's fun.

His other best friend is Alex, who lives at the end of the hall. Alex's parents are in banking, but Alex doesn't like to talk about them. He builds interesting things in shop, and he's better at drafting than Tony. For some crazy reason, Alex really likes drains and what he calls civil engineering. Na Anderson gets them some books on city planning and water treatment plants.

Tony and Alex build an ant colony for the state science fair. Their colony has three streams, a tiny sunken limestone treatment pond, running water in the ant houses, and a very complicated artificial overhead watering system that mimics temperate weather patterns. They hadn't been able to figure out how to make it snow without putting the ants into

hybernation, but Na Anderson says that's OK, because clearly the ants are living in California.

Tony's made the ants a fully integrated food delivery system that distributes their sugar-water and vitamins in random areas at various times. The ants have to send out their scouts and workers to collect the food. Tony's run their colony's ant lifespans against the controls supplied by the company that breeds the ants, and he's determined that his food delivery system seems to increase their lifespan and activity levels.

Their project has to be carried to the exhibition hall in a truck the school gets just for that purpose. The facility staff move the colony into the building using a palette lifter and some complicated rope nets Na Anderson designed.

Tony's pretty excited by the fair, and he wanders around all the different exhibits. The upper grades seem big on fruit fly breeding and growing bean plants under different lighting. Nobody's got anything as cool as their ant colony, he's pretty sure, although there are different teams who built go-carts from the ground up. That's kind of neat, but Tony's not allowed to machine parts himself yet, because of the whole live flame thing.

When he gets back to their ant colony, Na Anderson is gone, and their social studies teacher, Sa Hamilton is there. He smiles at Tony, but he looks like he has a headache. Alex isn't there, either, which is kind of disappointing. Tony wants to tell him about the vendor booth he saw, Price Manufacturing. They build Alex's favorite kind of PVC pipe, and they're giving out free samples.

"Na Stark," Sa Hamilton says, beckoning Tony over.

"Where's Alex?" Tony asks. "Price Manufacturing has--"

But Sa Hamilton is just shaking his head and smiling. "Free samples of every pipe known to man, yes, I've heard. We're having lunch in the atrium, Tony. Everyone else is there already."

"I guess I could eat," Tony mutters. He's had food in places like this before with his parents, and it's never been much. They always seem to serve fake broiled chicken and brocoli spears and rice pilaf. It's a weird law. Like, the Second Law of Conventions, right after Howard Stark Will Have a Work Emergency That Means He Can't Make It so Mom Will Have To Give All Awards.

Tony scuffs his converse on the shiny linoleum all the way back to the elevators. When they get out, there's a couple of burly people in black suits who smell like they're wearing alpha-pheromone cologne by the bucket. Tony sees Sa Hamilton try not to sneeze, which is pretty funny. One of the guards looks Sa Hamilton up and down, up and down, and kind of leers at him, but Sa Hamilton narrows his eyes and gives him this look. Tony's seen Sa Hamilton do it to tenth graders caught smoking, and it's really funny to see it used on adult. The guy isn't smart enough to take the hint, and Tony waits gleefully for Sa Hamilton's punishment. It's going to be epic.

The school secretary, Cindy, shows up, looking appalled, and hustles Sa Hamilton away before he can do anything to the guard. So unfair.

Then they're ushered into a big conference room full of people, and Tony's nose gets so overwhelmed it sort of shuts down. There's a lot of alphas here, and they're all throwing off enough real pheromones to give even Tony a headache.

Sa Hamilton gets that line between his eyebrows again, the one he got before he made all the ninth graders do collective bargaining roleplays with the third graders. (The ninth graders had totally lost, and the school is still talking about it.)

A woman in a very sparkly dress bustles over, looking absolutely thrilled. "Sa Hamilton, it's an absolute delight to have you here today!"

She's going to go for a double-cheek kiss, Tony can tell. He slips between them and says, really loudly, "Excuse me, but could you show us where the bathroom is? I really have to pee."

Tony's never tried this stuff before, even after they covered it in class a couple times, but wow, it works *great*. The lady looks both appalled and embarrassed, but more importantly, her whole body angles backwards from Sa Hamilton like she's just been shot. Ha. Tony may have to pay more attention in Deportment after this.

Sa Hamilton squeezes Tony's shoulder and says, "You'll excuse our manners, Elaine, but it was an awfully long drive over. You know how it is."

Elaine obviously thinks Sa Hamilton is apologizing for Tony. Her face softens and her scent gets a little sharper. *Jeez lady*, Tony thinks, *give it a rest*. But she's pointing out the discrete sign on a far wall, and that's enough.

They escape together. The omega bathrooms here are ridiculous. There are fainting couches in a weird lobby, and a whole bank of mirrors, and have they actually supplied lipsticks and hair brushes?

Tony wanders over, checking it out, while Sa Hamilton sits down and rubs his temples. Yep, headache.

"Thanks, Tony."

"No problem. It was fun. We tried it in class, but it's different to test a hypothesis under field conditions."

In the mirror, Tony can see Sa Hamilton smile. He still looks tired, but it's less pinched.

Tony takes a tub of lotion and sniffs it experimentally. Mostly water, a little oil, probably some kind of emulsifier. He wonders if it will work as a tiny petri dish, or if they've added too many preservatives for that. His heightened nose gets a whiff of Vitamin E. Too bad. He sets it back down.

"So how come that lady was going to touch you?" Tony asks. He figures they're private enough, and it's an omega bathroom after all, and he hasn't seen a single security camera in here.

"It's not that she was going to touch me," he says, but now he sounds tired again.

"She was totally going for the double cheek kiss so she could stick her nose against your scent glands," Tony says, scoffing. He pulls out the ridiculous cushy red bench seat at the wall of mirrors. Yeah, this will work. He hops up on it and then scrambles up on the counter.

Sa Hamilton doesn't even yell at him.

That bitch was definitely going for a gland-scent. "And she was gonna try to nip you, right?"

Sa Hamilton looks at his hands, and they're tightly clasped together. Knuckles white. Tony doesn't see any jewelry. Most married omegas have some kind of ring. Or a collar.

Finally, Sa Hamilton says, "You're too young to know about that kind of thing."

"We covered it in *class*," Tony says, disdainful but kind of puzzled too. Usually Sa Hamilton is smarter than this. Not Na Anderson smart, but pretty smart for a guy who spends his days talking about history and cultural mores across eras and geography, for godsakes.

"Sorry, I forgot." Sa Hamilton tips his head against the wall, throat bared. It's one of the classic submissive omega poses that Tony's seen in advertising. At home, it's in whiskey ads and cigarette ads and expensive ridiculous underwear ads. But he also sees it all the time in kids advertising--there's a kid playing on the floor with the gotta-have-it-now toy du jour, and there's some doting omega in the background, throat bared happily, and wearing some kind of outfit that would embarrass a kindergartner teacher for being too dull.

Tony isn't sure what's going on, but he has some ideas. He's used to the fancy level where waiters are circling with champagne flutes and tiny baby quiches. Mostly no one touched him at these things, but looking back, it was probably because he spent most of it hiding under the tables.

"We could leave," Tony offers. He's inspecting the hinge mechanism of the mirror cabinet.

"You and Alex are getting an award."

Tony bounces on his converse, but he's not as happy as maybe he could be. "Is my dad here?"

"Mr Stark was unable to attend due to urgent business. He sent a representative, though."

Of course he did, Tony thinks. As if dad would ever show up just to see his kid after months without him. "The representative's downstairs talking to the epoxy manufacturer," Tony says. He doesn't want Sa Hamilton to think he's a baby. It doesn't matter that dad's not here.

"You saw him."

"He didn't notice me," Tony says. He whips out his new screwdriver. Na Anderson had given it to him for his birthday, and it's got even more heads than his old one. She'd shown him how to add a tiny motor so he can now open things his small hands hadn't been able to manage before. "How about we rapell out the window and get cheeseburgers?"

"Very funny, Tony. I'll be fine in another minute. This is an important award, and you should be proud."

"Whatever. Nobody cares if I win an award." Tony figures there has to be an alcohol based cleaner in here somewhere, if he can just get the lock open without tripping the alarm....

"Honey, you can't know that." Sa Hamilton's heart doesn't seem to be in it, though. Probably because they're hiding in an omega bathroom to get away from a room full of creepy alphas who would poach a teacher at a kids function.

"Yeah, yeah, hand me that tube of lip gloss." Tony holds out his hand imperiously.

Sa Hamilton sighs but does it. "Don't blow up the bathroom, OK? I can live through some flirting, but I like this suit. If you trigger the automatic sprinklers, it won't survive."

Tony grins at him in the mirror. "Would I do that?"

Fifteen minutes later, Tony's finished putting the cabinet back together. It hangs just as neatly as it did before, and the lock looks perfect since he didn't so much as touch it. (Fingerprints, he needs to figure out a cure for fingerprints someday.)

Sa Hamilton is staring at the little container of what used to be lipgloss (it's color is apparently Come On, a kind of disturbing pearly white color that goes on mostly clear). "Tony, I just don't know."

Tony takes the second container of lipgloss (Bared, which is also mostly clear, but has some sorta skin-colored sparkles in it). He uses the lipgloss applicator to line each of his own nostrils, then inhales sharply. It really stings at first, but then it's blessed blessed nasal silence. Thank god.

Sa Hamilton takes his own lipgloss, scowls at the name on the tube, and doses his nostrils. He looks like it must sting on him, too. Tony's going to have to add some kind of numbing agent if he takes this public.

"Well?" Tony demands. "Does it work?"

Sa Hamilton is still frowning but the lines between his eyes are smoothing out. He shivers all over, then lets out a deep breath. "Yeah. It works. It really *really* works."

When they go back to the mass of people in fancy party wear, Sa Hamilton looks much more confident. He puts out a hand to stop the dreaded Eileen from doing another attempted cheek-kiss. She looks pissed, but he just uses the 'you're going to get in serious trouble if you keep this up' look. All he says is, "Eileen."

Eileen raises her chin. "Let me introduce you to the award presenter."

"Thank you, Eileen." They follow her and her sparkly dress through the crowd.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

My plan is to post a chapter a day. Thanks for the kind comments, everyone!

The award presenter turns out to be the Deputy Governor, who is here to 'embrace the spirit of entrepreneurship that will move our fine state forward into the future'. Tony is actually kind of glad that Sa Hamilton keeps a hand on Tony's shoulder the whole time.

It's comforting.

Tony's not a baby, but there's just so many people. Mostly alphas. The alphas keep shooting dagger looks at each other when they try to talk to Sa Hamilton. Sa Hamilton is so obviously not into any of them that it's uncomfortable. Tony hasn't really thought about taken-scents much since he got to school, because it just didn't matter there. Sa Hamilton's taken scent is present, but it's oddly muted. Tony thinks he smells nice--earthy, warm, like cinnamon.

One of the alphas, Tim Reading, must be the owner of Reading Manufacturing. Tony knows they're pretty big in consumer goods--everything from hairdryers to toasters to toys. Reading slips his arm around Sa Hamilton's shoulder and squeezes. It's way rude even for a party. Sa Hamilton tries to slip out from under it while not letting go of Tony.

Reading just moves with him. Tony tries to maneuver, but Sa Hamilton isn't letting him go. That's sweet, but annoying. This guy is going to go for a neck nuzzle or an actual gland bite. Tony can tell. He's seen guys like this pull this stuff at dad's parties. Tony's usually watching from behind a couch or under a table. It's a lot more uncomfortable up close.

"Thank you," Sa Hamilton says very firmly, "but I'm not interested."

"Your mouth says no but your body says yes yes yes," Reading croons.

Which is disgusting. It's also wrong, but Tony wouldn't give a shit even if it was true. That line has a whole chapter dedicated to it in Our Omega Bodies, and Tony's had just about enough of this guy's BS.

"I'm not interested," Sa Hamilton says, even more firmly. "Back off."

"Awwww, I know what you want. Want to be courted, petted. Telling me to back off just means you want to know I'll fight for you. I can do that, baby."

Tony makes a hacking noise, because gross. Who calls a teacher baby?

"I said, not interested." Sa Hamilton tries to grab the arm of a passing guy, but the dude just looks at Reading and grins.

Fuck, Tony thinks. This can't be happening.

Sa Hamilton has obviously realized that polite measures aren't going to work, and he levers an elbow to Reading's gut. Reading makes on oomph noise, but doesn't let go. He's got his nose buried in Hamilton's neck and Hamilton is shaking with anger. The grip on Tony's shoulder loosens for a second. That's all Tony needs.

He slips out of the grip, scampers around, and punches Reading as hard as he can--right in the nuts.

Reading screams and topples.

It's *very* gratifying.

The asshole alpha is now muttering horrible things about Sa Hamilton in particular and omegas in general and some comments about pushy brats who should be shown their place, so Tony kicks him in the mouth. Jerk.

Then it's kind of bedlam.

Reading's teeth are pinky-white with blood as he starts yelling at the top of his lungs, still crumpled on the carpet. Sa Hamilton shoves Tony behind him, and he starts yelling back. Sa Hamilton can yell a lot louder than Reading. Practice from wrangling students, maybe.

There's a whole bunch of adults getting into it now--mostly alphas yelling at Hamilton and a few trying to calm Reading. Nobody seems to think it's Reading's fault. Tony is so mad he starts yelling too. That Reading started it. That this whole party is sleazy. That alphas need to go back to kindergartner where the word 'no' is covered, because clearly the whole lot of them at this shindig are dirt stupid and missed it the first time.

They covered awkward passes in Deportment, and how yelling usually backfires, but Tony is way too angry to care. *None of this is their fault.* One of the adult alphas grabs Tony, probably to shut him up, and Sa Hamilton flips out.

Tony's never seen his mild-mannered social studies teacher lose it before. Sa Hamilton has a hell of a right hook, and the alpha crashes backwards into three other angry alphas. They all go down in a pile of shouts and curses and plastic champagne flutes.

Sa Hamilton is in front of Tony again, crouched, eyes fierce.

A woman in a dark blue cocktail dress emerges from the crowd.

Even with the nostril guard Tony cooked up in the bathroom, he can smell her. His dad called them Bitch Alphas. Top dogs. Her pheromones reek of quiet power and simmering anger.

Every adult goes silent, including Reading. Sa Hamilton is breathing heavily, his fists clenched, on his toes, ready to fight.

She's close enough for Tony to read her name tag. Iris Reading. CEO Reading Manufacturing. Uh oh. They are in big big trouble.

Iris Reading crouches down by Tim and looks him over. To Tony's surprise, Tim looks at the floor, submissive. She tips his chin up, but his gaze is still downcast. She tilts his face this way and that, then sighs. She shakes her head and grimaces.

The whole crowd stops breathing.

When she stands up, Tony squirms out of Sa Hamilton's grip and gets in front of him. He is not letting Sa Hamilton take the blame for this. "It wasn't Sa Hamilton's fault," he says fiercely. He can't punch her in the nuts, but maybe if she gets close enough, he can bite her.

"I see," she says. She looks Sa Hamilton over with one quick smooth glance. Tony thinks it's maybe the look his book talked about. Sometimes, in a crisis, an alpha will need to check someone else's omega for injury. Looking quickly and comprehensively is more polite than looking just one place or another. Still rude, of course, but less rude. "Are you harmed, Sa Hamilton?"

Sa Hamilton shakes his head.

"And yet, I smell your blood," Iris Reading says gently. "This altercation is the fault of a member of my family. I would consider it a favor if you allowed me to make restitution."

Sa Hamilton frowns. He looks even more tense, if that's possible. "I do not require restitution, Ms Reading."

"It would ease my mind if you allowed me to make it, nonetheless."

Sa Hamilton has not once dropped his gaze. Tony's pretty impressed. Every single person here, including some of the alpha-est alphas, all dropped their gazes. Who is this lady?

Sa Hamilton keeps his gaze focused on her face, seems to consider it. "I have bruised knuckles. I am otherwise physically fine. However, they upset an important award ceremony for my student. And one of them laid hands on him."

"I see." Ms Reading looks grave. She looks down at Tony, gaze carefully soft. "You are Na Stark?"

Tony's not wearing a name badge. He'd taken it off before he went to the exhibit hall so no one would know him. "Yeah. How'd you know?"

"You have the look of a Roanoke. From your mother's side. Howard Stark is the only man I know who managed to snare a Roanoke."

Huh. Everyone always says he looks like his dad. People barely remember mom exists. "What's a Roanoke?"

"It's the name of your mother's omega line. Very old, very famous." Iris Reading looks down at Tim, who is sullenly holding a hankie to his bleeding mouth. "Particularly famous for their charm, but also for their ferocity. I would like to make reparations to you as well, Na Stark, if you will permit."

Tony doesn't know what to say. That's not covered in Deportment until sixth grade. "Uh, I guess?"

"Thank you." Iris Reading doesn't seem to be joking. The whole thing feels kind of otherworldly. "Would you like me to speak to your father or would you prefer reparations be given to you directly?"

Tony feels himself go pale. Oh god, *dad*. Dad is going to kill him. Dad hates scenes like this, and he'll tell Tony what a disappointment he is. It won't matter whose fault it really is, it's always always Tony's. "Me. I mean, I'd rather--don't tell dad. Actually, you don't need to do anything. I'm fine. I don't need reparations."

"It will be a stain on my family if the insult goes unanswered," she says.

"OK. Um. Then sure, I guess?" Tony's mouth is always slower than his brain. His brain (genius-level Na Thompson told him two months ago) always comes up with a brilliant plan. "Wait. I know exactly what I want for reparations."

She crouches down, heels sinking into the plush carpet. Tony whispers into her ear for a while. Slowly, a broad smile crosses her face. "You are an excellent negotiator, Na Stark. I'm going to very much enjoy watching you take over Stark Industries in the fullness of time."

Tony tries to hide his surprise. Everyone knows he doesn't get to take over SI when dad retires. He can't even work there when he's older. Stark Industries runs mostly on Department of Defense contracts, and DoD is very strict. An omega can't head a company that produces equipment of sensitive nature, because there's just too great a chance for an omega to be swayed by a powerful alpha. Or be blackmailed if they're cheating on their spouse. And everyone knows that heats make omegas irrational. What if a crisis happened during an omega's heat? No, it was better to rely on sensible alphas or their calm beta cousins. An omega might work at SI, if they'd retired from homemaking and childcare and once they'd passed through menopause, as a tech or a minor designer. But as CEO? Not a chance. Sure, a few omegas held leadership positions at retail companies (mostly in makeup, clothing, or food products, not surprisingly), but this was America, not some louche country like Britain where an omega was actually in charge in of the RAF. So Tony wonders what she's talking about, hoping to watch him. But maybe it's just a random compliment.

Iris Reading is looking at her relative Tim with a kind of quiet glee. "It is my duty to inform those present that I have accepted the minor reparations Na Stark was gracious enough to propose. Given the severity of the offenses done against him and his teacher, I am grateful for his cool head and his willingness to overlook my family's regrettable lack of control."

Tim Reading looks about ready to spit glass. Tony is delighted, but he knows it's just going to get better.

"You will write, 'I will not touch other people without their permission' one hundred times on whiteboards across this convention center." Ms Reading's smile showed a lot of teeth. "Then you will write, 'Omegas are people. They get to choose who touches them.'"

Tim's face is turning purple with anger.

Tony bounces on his toes. This is the best idea he's ever had.

"Then you will write, 'I will keep my hands to myself for the rest of the day and I am very very sorry."

Sa Hamilton's face had been set in angry lines, but now it softens. His eyes are twinkling. "Does he have to sign his name?"

"Oh, I think that goes without saying," Ms Reading says. "Otherwise it wouldn't count as true reparations. Come along, Tim. My PA will get you some markers."

Tim scrambles to his feet, shaking with rage. He shoots them both a look, mouthing insults. Tony just waggles his fingers happily.

The other people all instantly scatter. It's impressive, and Tony wonders again who the hell Iris Reading really is.

*

When the judging is over, all the students and teachers from Miss Price gather at the big van. The older students have to have bodyguards with them at all times (two or three guards per pair of students), so it's a lot of people. Tony still can't find Alex.

Na Anderson has gone on ahead to make sure their science projects are moved properly--some are going on display here for a while, a few are going to a museum, and some are coming back to school.

Tony's not sure who to ask about Alex, but he's getting worried. Na Winston is over by a van, checking students against a clipboard. Maybe Tony can ask him.

"Excuse me. Do you know where my friend Alex is?"

Na Winston looks down at Tony, friendly, not worried. That's good. "Hey Na Stark. Na Richardson is having dinner with his parents tonight. They're really proud of his award."

"Thanks," Tony says. He goes back to hang with his other year-mates, but his stomach feels funny. The SI rep never bothered to say hi. He just collected Tony's award from the presenter and left.

*

Alex doesn't return to school for three whole days. "They took me to see the Hoover Dam as a treat," he says proudly.

"Cool," Tony says. He's not jealous. It is cool that Alex got to visit a dam, and the scale model and the book of blueprints Alex gives him is pretty neat.

Alex's parents are over the moon about his award. At his old school, Alex had been stuck in remedial math and science. His mom bought every the sample that Price Manufacturing brought to the fair, plus a complete set of PVC pipe-cutters, epoxies, braces, joins, the works. It's all spread out on Alex's carpet.

"They were worried I was stupid," Alex says airily. "So it was kind of a relief, I think."

Tony picks up a mechanical drain cleaner. "I bet I could make this better if I added a camera."

"Yeah? Let's do it!"

Tony starts drawing his idea for the camera and cleaner combo. Talking about it gives him something to do besides think about the way his parents haven't even called since he got to school. It's been eight months. Maybe they've forgotten he existed.

*

It's another year before Tony gets a chance to see his parents again. The Starks are big supporters of philanthropy, and Miss Price's Academy sponsors a huge gala once a year to benefit various charities.

Tony's pretty sure that his parents are coming because the gala gets written up in the Washington Post, and lots of important people will be there.

For security, the gala is held at a nearby fancy college. Students can attend the event if their parents are attending--although school bodyguards are still required to chaperone them.

When the big night comes, Tony dresses in his new dark gray suit. He learned to tie his own tie in Deportment. The vans come to pick them up, but before he climbs in, one of the teachers takes him aside.

"They're not coming," Tony says flatly.

The teacher, one of the upper-level teachers, looks kind of embarrassed. "Your father was called away to business."

"It's OK," Tony says. Except it isn't.

He spends the night in Na Anderson's workshop instead. She shows him a new motor she just got in, and Tony builds his first robot.

*

Predictably, Tony next sees his dad by accident. It's a few years later, and Tony's on a school fieldtrip to the UN Building in New York. The Miss Price students are milling in the lobby, gawping at flags of all nations, when Tony's dad hurries past with a few other people in suits.

"Dad?" Tony says. That is him, isn't it?

Howard Stark stops. "Tony, what are you wearing?"

Tony looks down at himself automatically. The teachers are pretty strict on dress codes for field-trips, but the school believes that a certain amount of personalization is good practice for learning the intricacies of personal style. Tony's wearing a black tee shirt and his very best jeans--buttery soft and worn thin in interesting places.

His father strides briskly over to them. "Is that *eyeliner*, Tony?"

"Uh," Tony says. He feels like a deer in the headlights. Only his dad makes him this stupid. "Yes?" It's just regular black eyeliner, pretty subtle. Totally normal for young omegas.

"You look like a--" His dad cuts himself off, huffs. "I cannot believe they let you out looking like this."

"Like what, dad--an omega?" Tony's never been good at keeping his mouth shut. Otherwise, he's dressed like ninety percent of the entire teenage population. There is nothing revealing about his clothes or the teachers would've made him change. He cannot believe his dad has a problem with that.

"Just because you are one doesn't mean you have to dress like one!"

Tony jerks back like he's been slapped. He can feel the blush work up his neck, but he refuses to be ashamed of what he is. "Hey, if you've got it, flaunt it. And boy do I ever have it." He cocks his hips, shifts his stance. It's a sexy, slutty look that Tony learned from an advanced deportment text he'd borrowed. He's not supposed to read ahead like that, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

That's too much for his dad, because Howard grabs him by the necklaces that Tony used to accessorize his outfit. "You behave," Howard says, voice low and menacing. The angry alpha pheromones are coming off him in waves. It's making Tony's eyes water.

Tony's back brain is telling him to back down. Lower his gaze, go quiet, submit. This is his alpha father, and he should show respect...mostly so he doesn't get the shit kicked out of him in front of his classmates.

But Tony's never been good at showing respect to pushy alphas who lay hands on him. Back brain still screaming, he raises his chin and meets his dad's eyes. "There is absolutely nothing I can do, nothing I can be, no way I can *behave*," he lingers on the word like it's poison, because it is, "that's ever going to be good enough for you."

"Shut your mouth, Tony." His dad twists his hand and gives the necklaces a shake. They're cutting into Tony's neck.

"Why, because I'm telling the truth?" Tony's on the tip of his toes, trying to get more air. "Even if I was dressed in a damn uniform that covered everything, you still wouldn't

introduce me to your friends. Not unless you wanted me to suck their cocks for a damn deal for Sta--"

The slap makes his head spin. Tony's hanging in his dad's grip, choking now, trying to stand back up. His dad is panting with rage. "Don't you *ever* talk like that again."

Tony can taste the blood from his split lip, but he's having trouble seeing. When his dad lets go, Tony collapses to the floor, head down.

"What is going on here?" There's a rustle, and then one of the teachers on the tour is kneeling next to Tony. "Na Stark, let me help you up."

"Leave him," Howard says. "He's not getting up until he apologizes."

But Miss Price Academy teachers are not easily cowed. "James, Andrea, please bring Bob and Jared over here. Their charges should come, too. Do it now, please."

Tony's staring at the floor, his father's shoes. Blood is trickling down his chin and his neck aches. "I'm sorry."

"Na Stark, we need to get you first aid," the teacher says. She puts a comforting hand on Tony's shoulder. He wishes he wasn't shaking. "An ice pack and some stitches."

"This is a family matter," his dad says. Of course his dad isn't satisfied with one quiet apology. He grabs Tony by the hair and yanks his head up. Tony keeps his eyes locked on dad's shoes. He hopes to hell he isn't crying. "What do you say, Tony?"

"I'm sorry, dad."

His father gives him a shake, pulling hard on his hair.

"I'm very sorry, dad," Tony says. His stomach is in knots. "I won't do it again."

"That's right, you won't. What else do you say?"

"Mr Stark, that's enough." Another teacher is talking, but Tony can't hear the rest of what they're saying, because it's pitched too low.

Tony can see the black cop shoes of the Academy's security team run into view. All the guards had taken their bathroom break, because the UN security in the lobby was supposed to be plenty. Of course, UN security would never dream of interfering with a small domestic disagreement.

Tony's eyes are watering--it's just because his dad is pulling on his hair, he's not crying. Anyone's eyes would water. It's not his fault.

Tony can hear his dad say something to the teacher, the guards. He catches only a few words. "--problem... discipline...Academy is supposed to be...I see...in the future...I suppose that's the most...always been a disappointment....of course..." Every extra loud word is accompanied by a small shake to Tony's hair. It hurts like hell.

With no warning, his dad lets go. Tony barely catches himself. His face is only a few inches from the polished marble floor. He's dripping blood on it, and he's trying very hard not to whimper.

The talking continues, but Tony can't hear anything distinct, except for the word 'disappointment'. He knows that already.

His dad's shoes shift and then his father says, loud and clear, "I swear, Anthony, I don't know what I'll even tell your mother."

Tony flinches again. His dad sighs, and Tony watches Howard's shoes walk away.

Tony's taken back to the school van with three bodyguards and one of the lower-grade teachers. The give him a couple of ice packs and sit him in the back row. He tries to work on problem sets in his head, but even math doesn't help. Tony's pretty sure he won't be allowed to go on field trips anymore.

No one says anything to him when they get back from the field trip, not even his friends. Nobody sits near him. Tony's half-grateful, half-resentful. He'd really wanted to know how the inner workings of UN security looked.

When they get back to school, it turns out that Howard called the Headmaster. Tony's grounded for a week. No group meals, no extra-curricular activities, no phone calls (as if Tony actually got any calls from outside), and no leaving his room except for classes. Tony knows he got off lightly. He waits for the other shoe to drop, because Howard is pretty thorough when he's angry.

A week and a half later, Tony gets a short note from his mother. She's never sent him anything except birthday and Christmas cards. All it says is, 'Tony, please try not to make your father so angry. Love, mom'

Tony shoves the card in a drawer and goes back to building his robots. Howard seems to have forgotten about Tony again, because when the school has a fieldtrip to the Museum of Science and Industry, Tony gets to go.

This time, Tony wears a purple-shimmer eyeliner called Rockstar and lipgloss in Naked, and he deliberately wears a tee shirt one size too small.

*

Tony starts hitting puberty when he's fourteen. At first, it's little stuff. He gets really upset when one of his new robots doesn't work right, and he's so mad he throws his wrench. Throwing things is absolutely forbidden in the workshop, and when Na Anderson asks him what he was thinking, Tony honestly can't say.

She gives him a long look, then sniffs delicately. Tony's flushed and cranky, and he gives her a look right back.

When it happens a second time, Na Anderson writes him a pass to see the school nurse.

*

They cover puberty in omega health class, but it's different to experience it firsthand. The nurse checks him over and gives him some chamomile tea. The school will switch him to the Deportment and Health classes for omegas who've hit puberty.

Tony learns some deep breathing exercises that are supposed to help calm his emotions. Tony has some more minor fits of anger, but according to his new class, they're small change compared to what's coming.

The most common side-effects of omega puberty are: vertigo (43.5%), nausea (39%), headaches (32%), undirected arousal (27%), mood swings (23%), and panic attacks, sometimes crippling ones, (19%).

"You are shitting me," Tony says.

"Unfortunately not, Na Stark. Now, has everyone read the chapter on omega puberty-era physiology?"

The lecture is just full of alarming pictures of internal organs. Tony stares in morbid fascination most of the time, because omega innards must have been designed by a drunken anatomy artist. On LSD.

After covering the side effects and the anatomy, the teacher moves on to palliative care (better known as ways to make this suck less). The recommended life style changes and approved medication list is ridiculously short. The school already insists that they eat lots of leafy greens and fresh vegetables, calcium-rich yogurt, and lean meats. With all the damn sports, martial arts, yoga, dance classes, and running, everyone here gets their recommended exercise. There's only two medications on the approved list: Omacea (a mild analgesic that only works in 62% of omegas) and Phelessa (an anti-nausea med that can only be used occasionally because of the long-term side effects).

Tony throws his hand up in the air and demands, "Why the hell can't we get some Xanax? Screw addictive properties. If I'm welding, I can't afford to get panicked. I could accidentally put someone's eye out."

The teacher goes into a long-winded explanation of omega brain physiology, serotonin, dopamine, and other medical facts Tony could have lived without. (He hadn't wanted to know that ibuprofen causes ulcers in omegas after only four or five doses, and he *really* hadn't wanted the helpful medical textbook illustration the teacher had popped on the view screen. Gross.)

While the teacher burbles on (oddly, alcohol and opiates are some of the few medications that don't destroy omega internal systems, which is sort of interesting), the kid in the seat across from him writes something on a piece of paper, folds it, and slips it onto Tony's desk.

Tony opens it carefully. 'Because biology fucking hates us.'

Truer words.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The school must have told his parents about his little wrench-rage moment, because that weekend, Tony's mom calls. Tony gets calls so rarely that at first he's sure it's for someone else.

"Look, you're Anthony Stark, right?" the little nine year old at his door asks. She's on phone duty this week. All the youngest students take turns by rota.

"Yeah," Tony admits. "But my parents never call."

"Then it's for you," she says and walks away, braids swaying, to tell the person on the floor's only phone that Anthony Stark will be right there.

Tony frowns at the beige phone hanging by its cord. He doesn't want to go over and answer it. Still, it'll be worse the longer he waits.

"Hello?" Tony asks. He has a moment of what has got to be stupid omega-hormone induced panic and adds, "I'm sorry, I mean, This is Anthony Stark speaking. How may I help you?"

"Tony, it's your mother."

Oh thank god. Tony slides down the wall and sits on the floor. "Hi mom."

"It's good to talk to you, Tony." That's the same phrase she uses in all her phone calls. He's sure she'd use it in any circumstance--'It's good to talk to you, Anna, I'm so sorry that Howard had to fire you for corporate espionage.' But her voice does make him feel something. Not happy. It's not happiness. Can't be.

Definitely not.

"Tony, are you still there?"

"Yes, sorry mom, another student asked me something. I'm back now."

She clears her throat. "Tony, we had a call from the school the other day."

Even though he knows that this has to be why she's calling, it doesn't stop the panic bubbling in his stomach. "Does dad know?"

"Of course your father knows."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Tony is in such deep shit.

"He's pleased, just as I am, to hear that you're growing up."

What? "Uh, what did they say?"

"They told us they've moved you to a more advanced health class."

That's probably as blunt as his mother is capable of getting. "Yeah. It's, um, interesting." Why the hell was she calling if he not in trouble?

"So, your father and I talked about it, and we've decided that we should meet with you soon."

"You should? You are?"

"Of course, darling. This is an important milestone in your life. Of course we'll be there."

They never have before, but Tony's getting better at self-control. He doesn't actually say that aloud. "Oh. Well, thanks mom. It's just changing class, though. It's not that big a deal."

"Tony," she says, and he can hear the exasperation. "You know what I mean."

He has no idea, actually. "I'm not sure I do, mom. Seriously."

There's a pause. "Oh. Well, your father and I would like to meet with you. It's time to begin planning your future."

That sounds....ominous.

"I've arranged with the school to have our driver pick you up on Saturday morning. You'll come into the city, and we'll have lunch. Won't that be fun?"

Tony's pretty sure fun isn't even in the same room. "Sure, mom. It sounds great."

*

Tony spends the rest of the week fretting. He ends up wearing a burgundy sweater, dress slacks, and his best black shoes. It's fashion tragic, but it's much safer.

Ten minutes before the driver is due to show up, Tony wrestles the clothes off. When he goes down to meet the car, he's wearing a black dress shirt, dark-wash jeans, and low boots. No eyeliner, because he's not that stupid. Also, because Alex stole it and Tony hasn't remembered to buy more.

He shouldn't have bothered, because dad doesn't show. His mom's first agenda item (even before lunch) is to get him something decent to wear. It's his birthday present, she says, as she hauls him to her tailor.

Tony stands in new underwear and dress socks as the tailor measures every single part of his body. Twice.

The school chaperone reads a book in one corner of the room, and his mom talks fabrics with the fabric-specialist in the other corner.

No one asks what Tony thinks.

He gets out of there with hastily adjusted off-the-rack pants and an oversized cashmere sweater in rich dark red. She hauls him off to Bloomingdale's for cologne. Tony's not consulted for this either, but he does manage to talk her out of buying him a bottle of O on the grounds that it makes him sneeze. She pouts, but then discovers Do Me, which is French and very expensive.

Tony thinks it smells like weasel funk, but he doesn't say anything when she puts it on his scent gland. The point of the ultra-expensive omega perfume is that it's supposed to react with omega scent glands to produce a scent that's alluring to alphas. ("Because who cares what betas think," Tony mutters, and the counter clerk winks at him. She's a beta. Tony can smell it.)

Do Me makes Tony's scent shift to an earthy amber, instead of his usual just-forged iron smell. Tony doesn't like it nearly as well, but his mom does. She's paying, and he hasn't seen her in years. When the clerk boxes it up, he offers to carry the bags.

His mom kisses his cheek and takes him to another department.

They hit most of the departments, and his mom starts having the boxes and bags sent on. Tony's old enough to get a sense of just how much money his parents have, because the clerks treat his mom even more deferentially than they do the rich old ladies with Coach purses and orange lipstick.

Tony's decided he kind of likes shopping with his mother. She has an eye for color, and she loves texture. Everything she buys for him has to be well-made and soft. "Who cares what it looks like if it gives you a rash, darling?"

It's actually pretty fun.

When she hauls him to makeup, Tony doesn't protest. His mom had picked up a couple things for herself as they browsed (*devastated* is probably more accurate) the racks of clothes. She probably just wants a new lipstick.

Tony leans on the counter as she flips through Dior's lip-glosses and eye shadow palettes. The people watching here is fantastic. One of the old bats has two Chihuahuas in her giant Coach purse. One of the tiny dogs is snoring softly, and the other is nibbling on its buddy's ear. Another old bat (her friend it looks like) is making one of the sales clerk go find a chartreuse silk scarf to match her ugly Sunday-best hat.

"Try this one, darling," she says, tugging on his sleeve.

Tony turns, curious, and his stomach drops out. His mom is holding out a small eye color palette. Cream, pink, brown, and dark purple.

"Now Anthony," she says, not unkindly. "I know you probably think that there's something underhanded about wearing makeup. But appearance is important."

"Dad will kill me if I put that on."

"Don't you worry about your father. I'll handle him." She sets down the pink-purple set.

"No, mom, really. He will have a shit fit."

"Don't use language, Anthony. It's rude." She grabs his chin and tilts his face this way and that. "Marge, get the Definicils, black. Maybe we'll go with a smoky black for the eye, too. But a light gloss for the lips."

"Mom--I really don't think--"

"Hush." She's holding his face still, still tilting it gently one way and another.

Tony's embarrassed and terrified, but this is the closest he's been to his mom in ages. Years. He's going to make dad mad no matter what. Maybe making mom happy is within his grasp. "OK, mom," he says.

They eat a hurried lunch at a tiny cafe his mom likes. She makes him finish his whole sandwich. It's weird, but sweet.

Then, to Tony's surprise, she insists he go back to the tailor for a second fitting. Then it's shoes, jeans, and jewelry. Tony has no idea what he's going to *do* with all this stuff.

"Wear it," she tells him, dragging him into another shop.

*

When Tony gets back home, there's a small mountain of shopping bags waiting in his room. His friends think it's pretty funny, but Tony doesn't care.

It's the nicest day he's ever had with one of his parents.

He writes her a thank you note (blue-black ink, handwritten, off-white stationary monogrammed with a simple gold AES on the envelope flap).

*

Three weeks later, on a Thursday, he gets a phone message pinned to his door. 'Driver will pick you up at 10 am Saturday. Wear the navy sweater and gray slacks, Varvatos boots. Bring toiletries, makeup, Ferragamos, maybe also casual clothes for next day, in carryon bag. Drinks and dinner in the city. First, suit fitting. Love, mom.'

Tony was supposed to help Melody practice for her brown belt this weekend. In a daze, he tells her he's sorry but his mom's taking him to dinner. He expects Melody to be pissed, but she just hugs him. Tony's not the only one at the school whose parents prefer to pretend their omega kids don't exist.

*

Tony's surprised at how comfortable the suit is. "It's all in the tailoring," his mother says. "Oliver is a genius. We're so lucky to have him in New York."

Over lunch, his mother tells him about the different kind of tailors. Oliver is a British-style tailor. A good choice for his first suit. When he's older, more sure of his style, she'll take him to Rome and Milan.

They go to the New York Public Library, for fun, and then she takes him shoe shopping again. Tony never asks her why they just stuck him at school. He's pretty sure her new interest in him has to do with something dad wants, but maybe he's wrong.

It doesn't hurt to pretend, just for an afternoon, that she loves him.

*

Late that afternoon, they check into a hotel. Their dinner party is being held here, and Tony discovers it's more of a party-party and less of a dinner. Over thirty people have been invited. "Friends of your father's, mostly," she tells him.

Dad is expected to meet them there.

Tony changes into the suit she picked for him. There's an undershirt, a perfect bespoke dress shirt, proper cashmere dress socks, even a pocket handkerchief.

The suit is a dark navy with widely-spaced pinstripes. The shirt is bright crisp white. The tie dark blue silk.

His mother brings him cufflinks. They're a shiny shimmery metal alloy that Tony doesn't recognize, and she attaches them herself.

When she's straightened his tie to her satisfaction, she smiles. "Very, very nice. Now, to the finishing touches!"

The finishing touches turn out to be a new cologne she found in Paris (tres magnific, she says, you'll love it!) and makeup. Tony lets her put the cologne on his neck. Surprisingly, it takes his molten iron scent and magnifies it. "Yes, perfect," she says, pleased.

Tony's pretty sure that if mom likes it, dad will hate it.

He has to pace while she picks over the makeup. His mom isn't very tall, so she makes him sit on the chair while she applies it.

"Mom, I just don't know," Tony mutters.

"Well, I do," she says, smudging his eyeliner with a practiced finger. "They'll eat you up with a spoon."

She fusses with his hair, adjusts the hang of his suit coat, and then turns him to face the mirror.

Tony looks....different.

Older, yes. It's not just that. With the makeup, his eyes smolder. The suit makes him look wealthy, and his tumbled hair makes him look wild. He smells so much different than usual it's hard to feel normal.

In the mirror, his mom stands slightly behind him. She's wearing a dark blue silk dress. Her earrings and necklace are made of the same odd alloy as his cufflinks. So, Tony notices, is her wedding ring.

People always say that he looks like his dad, but today, the resemblance to his mother is striking. They both have dark brown eyes, long long lashes, smooth olive-tinted skin. He isn't very tall, and neither is she. Her hair is coiled up, but a few tendrils have fallen down to frame her face, just as a long lock has fallen over his forehead.

She smiles at him in the mirror, and Tony smiles back.

*

The dinner is scheduled to start at 7:00 pm. At 6:30, they go down. His mother takes Tony by the elbow. Maybe she's afraid he'll bolt.

Guests begin arriving at 6:35. His mom introduces him as "our son, Anthony." It only takes Tony two introductions to figure out what's going on.

The first introduction is to Sheila Park. Tony's read about her in the Wall Street Journal. He smiles politely and lets her shake his hand, but he has a bad feeling about this.

Sheila Park owns Park Industrial with her brother, Greg. Their company is an important supplier of machined parts. Sheila is thirty-nine and single. Tony can smell the alpha pheromones on her when she walks in the door.

"Maria," she croons, squeezing his mom's hands. "It was so kind of you to invite me." Her eyes measure Tony and her smile is approving.

He smiles back, but it's forced.

The second introduction is to Ted and Chloe Winters. After saying hello to Maria, Ted looks Tony up and down. "Well aren't you a gorgeous little thing."

Tony wishes his dad would hurry the hell up. Maybe if he picks a fight, dad will send him home.

Jack Thompson is next. "Maria, where's Howard been hiding this delicious creature?"

"Miss Price's," Maria says, winking.

"Really," Thompson says. The greed in his voice is obvious. "Howard always was smart about keeping his assets secure."

Tony's cheeks heat with shame. He doesn't want to hurt his mom's feelings, but he has to get out of here. Dad's friend just speculated about his goddamn sex life. In public. *To his mother.*

His mom just laughs at Thompson's joke and turns to the next party guest. "Darling, I'd like you to meet Dr Ravi Singh."

Tony turns obediently. He memorizes the doctor's name using a mnemonic taught in Deportment class, chats briefly about sports, and moves on to the next guest.

All of the guests are distinguished, well-educated, wealthy, and alpha. A third are married couples. All of them look Tony over with an acquisitive gleam in their eyes. His mother is no help whatsoever. She tells the guests interesting tidbits about Tony's schooling, his hobbies, his life.

Tony should be glad she's been paying attention to whatever reports the school sends home, but it's difficult to hear his award-winning robot AIs called "these funny little moving arms--all gears and engines and whatnot, Howard can tell you all about them. It's so charming how Tony wants to be like his father, isn't it?"

Tony opens his mouth to explain about their learning capabilities, but his mom just presses her hand on his back. He smiles instead, feeling plastic. One of the tricks he learned at school to deflect unwanted personal attention was to steer the conversation onto the other person. Ask about their life, their work, their family.

It works well for a while. Tony's pretty proud of his own cleverness until one lady says, "He's such a good listener. I've always said omegas make the best spouses--they're always more interested in others' needs than their own."

That puts an end to that party trick. Jesus.

All the guests have arrived by the time his dad shows. His mom is squiring him around the room, making sure he talks to everyone, when there's a ripple near the door.

Tony tenses automatically. He knows exactly who that has to be.

It takes Howard a good ten minutes to make his way through the crowd. When he reaches them, he gives his wife a kiss on the cheek. With his hand still on her waist, he looks Tony over. "You took him to Oliver, I see. It's a little loud, don't you think?"

"It's an omega cut," mom says, poking dad in the chest playfully. "Besides, when have you ever paid attention to high fashion?"

Howard just grunts at that. Tony's kept his eyes on the floor. No matter how many dignitaries are in the room tonight, they'd all deferred to Howard. Tony was not going to make the mistake of showing disrespect to his dad in front of anyone. The silence is getting kind of awkward, but Tony doesn't break it. By protocol, his dad should be the one to speak first.

"So," Howard says at last, "your mother says you had a nice time shopping."

Tony glances up carefully. Howard is watching him, expression blank, like poker nights when Tony was a kid. "We did. It was a lot of fun." Tony licks his lips, tastes lip-gloss. "Thank you for paying for all the nice clothes, dad."

Howard keeps watching him, looking him over. "Did your mother pick that out, too?"

"Yeah. She said--" Tony looks over at her, but she's waving to another friend. Tony looks back at his dad, steels himself. "She said it would look right tonight, but--I can wash it off, if you want."

Howard grunts again. "No. It's fine. Different times. Good to see you're better behaved, though. That school--"

"Is very well respected," his mom cuts in. "I'll get you a whiskey, dear. Have the contractors been late again? You're like a cranky bear tonight." She flags down a waiter.

"No, we're having trouble with a propulsion system."

Tony leans forward unconsciously. "On the Scavenger Mark III?"

"How did you know about that?" Howard asks, eyes narrowed.

"I was reading about it in the Journal of Aerodynamics. They've got some preliminary data from a test run SI did out in New Mexico. The results made me wonder if the fuel lines are causing--"

"Anthony," his mother says firmly. "No shop talk at a party."

"But mom--"

"Don't backtalk your mother, Tony," his dad says.

Tony shuts up, but he's frustrated. For once in his miserable stupid life, he'd like someone to let him finish a damn sentence. He'd like to be able to ask his father an actual question about engineering and get a damn answer.

He stares at the carpet, too upset to say anything.

"Now darling, don't sulk. It's not attractive. And Howard, dear, here's your whiskey. Isn't that better?"

Because being attractive is the most important thing. The only thing. Tony clamps his teeth together so he won't say it.

"Maria, go check on Ravi and Thompson, will you?"

"Howard, I don't think--"

Howard tips his head toward the corner where two guys are clearly arguing. His mom sighs, shoots his dad a look, and leaves.

Howard swirls his whiskey and ice, knocks some back. "Your mother put this together."

Tony slowly raises his head. "I thought she just wanted to, I don't know. Have lunch." Spend time with him, like a normal person.

Howard narrows his eyes. "She did." Yeah, so much for honesty. "You've been sheltered your whole life. You have no idea how the real world works. Especially as what you are."

Tony looks sharply away, then back, meets his dad's gaze straight on. It's rude as hell, but Tony doesn't care. "Can you even say it?"

Howard lights a cigarette and blows smokes out. "You are one bratty kid. Don't make me--"

His mom shows up, towing a blonde young woman only a few years older than Tony. "Darling, I'd like you to meet Charmaine Greer. Charmaine, this is my son, Anthony Stark."

Tony shakes her hand. She smells like wildflower meadows overlaid by sharp ozone. "It's very nice to meet you, Sa Greer."

She smiles at him, and dimples pop out on her cheeks. "Call me Cherry. Everyone does. Is this your first intro bash, Anthony?"

"Yeah." His parents are discretely vanishing. Tony wonders if he'll get to see them again before they leave.

"They're really boring, sorry." She grabs two champagne flutes off a passing tray. "Here. Want the lowdown?"

Tony takes the flute. "Sure."

Cherry is charming and vicious, and she has the dirt on everyone here. Jack Thompson is new money; he made his fortune in computers. Dr Ravi Singh is fine, if you like them dull. Ted and Chloe Winters enjoy kinky sex, and they've had five short-term marriage contracts with omegas this year alone. But they can afford it--old money, banking. Rumor is they're looking for an omega or two, permanent. Double-jointed a plus. The Andersons are hoping to find a nice baby factory; so are the Drivers.

Tony sips his champagne. It's making his head buzz pleasantly. "What's it like, being married?"

Cherry sips her own. "Overrated. You'll get used to it, though."

Tony can see she has on a wedding band. "Yours is permanent, right?"

"Right."

*

His mom collects him soon after. Tony makes another round of the room, smiling and schmoozing until his face aches. When dinner is served, he turns out to be seated with the Andersons on each side. They're not bad company. Mrs Anderson asks him what he's interested in at school. She likes the sound of the robots, and she asks him interesting questions about them.

During dessert, Mr Anderson slides a hand up the back of Tony's chair. Tony doesn't pay much attention until he feels the hand on the back of his neck. Tony goes still.

It should bother him, but when Mr Anderson runs his fingers through the short hairs there, it feels surprisingly good. Tony's eyes slide closed, and he shivers.

"George," he hears Mrs Anderson say. "Play nice, now."

"I am playing nice," Mr Anderson says. "Don't you think so, Anthony?"

Tony's having a hard time registering words. He blinks a couple times, tries to focus, but he just feels so damn good. Mr Anderson's rhythmic gentle touches are going to his head worse than the champagne.

"Hmm," his wife says. "We'll have to talk to Howard."

That pulls Tony out of the haze. He leans forward so he's out of reach. It takes effort to focus on the food, but he forces himself to finish eating. No way in hell does he want his dad to see him like this.

*

When Tony gets home, he goes straight to his room. He knows some of his friends are still up, because he can see the lights on under the doors.

Tony looks at himself in the mirror. His hair is still tousled, his eyes still smoky with eyeliner and mascara. The lip-gloss is long gone. The suit does hang beautifully, and the cufflinks shine.

When he closes his eyes, Tony can feel the ghost Mr Anderson's fingers on the back of his neck. The way they'd lingered, caressed. *Seduced*. Tony knows that Mrs Anderson had been watching the whole time as her husband touched him. He could smell the arousal coming off both of them. She'd liked watching him be touched.

Tony opens his eyes again. In the mirror, his pupils are dilated. This is what everyone saw. Slightly open mouth, dazed expression, the pulse jumping at his throat. The whole party had been about this. A bunch of adults, trying him on, the way he and mom had tried on expensive clothes at Bloomingdales.

He closes his eyes again, shuts them tight. How many had talked to his parents about buying?

Tony takes a shower and leaves the new suit crumpled on the bathroom floor.

Chapter End Notes

Young!Tony's suit (as worn by much older Tony). Note the cut and the absolutely perfect matching of stripes from shoulder seam to sleeve, pockets, etc. Damn, that's a fine suit.

The mascara his mom buys him is Lancome Definicils, often considered to be the best mascara in the world.

Chapter 4

Two weeks later, Tony comes back from a pretty good lecture on Euclidean and Non-Euclidean geometry to find another note stuck on his door.

'Please tell Anthony we are having drinks and lunch in the city. Wear the aubergine silk, dark pants, brown boots not corduvan, earring if he has one, defin (sp?)-something--mascara, and paris cologne. Going to art. Sat, 9. Love, mom. ps Tony your mom talks fast, sarah.'

Tony has an essay due Monday, and he'd put it off because of the special math lecture series this week. Oh well. He'd just have to tell Na Holland that his mom was hauling him off. There seemed to be more of that in the upper classes.

On Saturday, Tony dresses in the requested outfit. He doesn't have an earring, but he puts on several of his favorite necklaces. They're black leather tails with silver charms, and layered together, it's a little bit sexy rock star. Or so Tony likes to think.

Mom sends the Bentley again. It's a cushy ride into the city, and the chaperone sits up front with the driver. When the driver pulls up in front of a fancy building with a doorman, his mother trots briskly to the car and hops in next to him before Tony can get out.

She's smiling, perfumed, happy, then her face clouds over, like thunder. Great. "Darling, what is this trash?" Her manicured nails pluck at his necklaces.

"Hi to you, too, mom."

"Off, off, off. Anthony, honestly, what if your father saw?" She's grabbing the necklaces and yanking them around, looking for the clasps.

"Mom, just a second, I'll get them--"

His mom is determined, though, and she undoes each one herself. When they're all off, she rolls down the window of the Bentley and hurls them out.

"Mom!" Tony turns, trying to see where they went. "What is wrong with you? Those were mine!"

"Anthony Edward Stark, you look at me right now."

Dammit, cars had already run over them. He loves those necklaces. It took him years to collect them all. Melody had given him the Sabbath one, too.

"Anthony!" his mother yells.

Tony winces. He sits back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. His mom is loud--and crazy.

She's breathing hard. "Anthony. What were you thinking, wearing those today?"

Tony's jaw tightens. "I don't have an earring. I thought they looked--" Cool. "Nice. You didn't have to throw them out the window."

"If your father saw them, he'd have done a lot more than throw them out the window."

"I don't see what the big deal is."

"Anthony." Her mouth thins tight. "You're old enough to understand that we're introducing you to people. It's important that you make a good impression."

"So you can marry me off. Yeah, I got that memo last time."

"Don't be sarcastic at me. This is important, this is your whole future. Wearing necklaces may seem harmless, but it's not. You're not a beta, Anthony. Just because beta teenagers wear necklaces like this doesn't mean you can."

Tony rolls his eyes. "One of them had an ACDC logo. It doesn't say property of Brad, who by the way fucked my brains out last night."

"Do you want to deal with me about this or do you want to deal with your father?"

Tony glares out the window.

"I know it seems unfair. But that's how life is. You can't go around wearing necklaces with names on them. It gives people the wrong idea about you. You're a good person, Anthony, and you come from a good family."

"And wearing a cologne called Do Me gives the right impression?"

His mom smooths her skirt down. "It's not the same thing."

They're passing by a street with a movie theater. Tony's never been. "Did you know that I've never been to the movies, mom?"

"What?"

"I've never seen a movie."

"Don't be melodramatic, honey."

"I'm serious. I've never been to a movie theater like a normal person. We have films in the auditorium, but I've never bought a ticket and popcorn."

His mom scoots closer so she can touch his shoulder. Tony ignores her. He doesn't want to play pretend today.

"They're playing one of the new Star Wars, and I won't get to see it for another year. All because I've got indoor-outdoor plumbing. That's fucking dirt stupid, if you ask me."

"Nobody asked us, Anthony. That's not how the world works."

He shrugs hard enough to dislodge her hand.

"Honey, I know you didn't mean anything by wearing them, but you just can't do those things anymore. Anytime an omega wears a necklace, it's going to be seen in a certain way. When you're a child, you can get away with it more. You're older now. It's different. Especially if there are initials on them, or symbols. I need you to promise me that you won't do that again."

"I can't, because you threw them *out the window* like a crazy person. Haven't you ever heard of littering?"

"What did you do with the cufflinks I gave you?"

Tony shrugs again, brittle. Who gave a shit about the cufflinks. They were just to show off how much money the Starks had.

"Why don't you wear those instead, next time?"

"I'll pass, thanks." Tony doesn't want 'Property and Descendent of Howard Stark, Return if Found' stamped on his ass.

"They're special."

"You know what, mom? They'd have meant a lot more when you guys forgot my birthday when I was at school *alone* when I was *nine*."

She doesn't say anything after that.

Traffic is slow, and the awkward silence lingers. Tony isn't going to break it. He's said plenty already. He wishes he'd told his mother that he couldn't come today because of the essay due for class.

After a long time, his mother clears her throat. "We're going to the MoMA today. I checked with the school, and they said you haven't been there in a couple years."

Right, of course she'd checked with the school. Why ask Tony? "OK."

"Are you going to stare out the window the rest of the day?"

Tony sits back, looking at her. He doesn't say anything.

"All right. Do I get more than monosyllables?" She tries a smile, but it's shaky.

"What do you want me to say, mom?"

"Whatever you're thinking, honey."

Yeah right. "I don't think that's such a good idea." Tony wishes he'd kept staring out the window. His mom looks as trapped as he feels. Beautiful dark red silk dress, perfect lipstick, ironic diamond pendant on a short gold necklace.

"I'd like to know." She clears her throat again, twirls the wedding band on her finger. "Did you have fun at the party?"

"No." Tony turns back to stare out the window. "Except for when Mr Anderson felt up my neck. I liked that part."

"We're on to shocking. I guess that's progress."

"You asked," Tony snaps, turning back. "Quit asking if you don't want to know."

"So, he--really did that. At the party?"

"During dessert, yeah. Guess you're thinking that skipping the school chaperone wasn't such a hot idea, since your son can be turned on with just a little--"

"Anthony!"

"You started it." Tony thunks his head against the seat of the Bentley, but it's too cushioned to be satisfying.

After a pause, she says, "I think you're right. It wasn't fair of me to tell you that I wanted to know what you were thinking and then not listen. When I picked the seating for the party, I thought the Andersons would enjoy your company. I thought you would enjoy theirs, too. I didn't expect they'd take things so far. I should have. I'm sorry."

His mom sounds subdued, not her usual confident self.

"I told you. I enjoyed it." He shrugs again.

"Honey," her voice is very careful, the words oddly slow. "Anthony, honey."

"Oh god, mom, just say whatever you're going to say and get it over with."

She sighs. "I'm trying to be tactful."

"Why start now? Starks don't do tact. Didn't dad tell you?"

"Contrary to what the world thinks, I'm not an extension of your father," she says sharply.

Tony's not sure what to think of that. "Sorry."

"It's fine." She's looking down at the wedding band on her finger, twisting it around and around, so the odd alloy gleams in the sunlight coming through the windows. "Anthony, I'm not sure what school covers in your health class as far as this goes, but..."

When she drifts off, Tony decides to save them both from this hideous conversation. "I know about omega arousal zones, mom. It's in the textbook. I'm good."

"No, that's not what I meant." She's gnawing her lipstick off, which Tony's never seen her do before. Mom's makeup had always been perfect. Of course, a lot can change if you don't see

someone for years.

"What did you mean, mom?"

She sits up straighter. Oh god, she's bracing herself. Fuck. "The Andersons are a nice couple." That's obviously not what she meant to say, though, because she backtracks. "Anthony, different people find different things arousing. If you enjoyed what he did, that's OK."

"OK," Tony says warily, because she's right. She is *really* not an extension of dad.

"It's--" She looks at the ceiling of the Bentley and chews off more lipstick. Whatever she sees there (punched leather perfectly sewn in?) seems to fortify her. Her shoulders square up and she looks Tony in the eye. "I'm mad at Mr Anderson for doing that, because arousing an omega in public is dangerous. He's an alpha, so he's stupid enough not to think about it. I won't hold it against him. When I say different people find different things arousing, I didn't mean you directly."

"OK," Tony says again, but what he actually means is What?

"I think they must not cover this in class. Maybe--indirectly. But I'm your mother."

"Uh, mom, I really have no idea what you're talking about."

She's spinning her ring again, absently. "Some alphas like to arouse omegas in public. It's a power play. Look what I can make him feel, look what a good lover I am, look how vulnerable I made him. They're showing off their prowess, do you see?"

Tony feels the shame pool in his stomach. "Yeah, I get it."

She grabs his chin because he's staring down. "And," she adds, "because it gets other alphas interested. It can start a fight."

"They covered that part in class." His mom is kind of worrying him. If she tells dad he started a fight... "I wouldn't do that, mom. I wouldn't start a fight at your party."

"*You* wouldn't. But that's what I'm telling you, Anthony. This isn't always up to us. Mr Anderson took advantage of you. You weren't expecting it, and frankly, neither was I. He and his wife are harmless, but getting you hot at the dinner table in front of people like Winters and Thompson isn't harmless."

"You think it started a fight?"

"No." Her mouth is a thin tight line. "It's complicated. But I think if Ted Winters is careless about how he talks about you, your father will kill him."

Now who's being melodramatic? "Mom." Tony rolls his eyes. "Dad isn't going to get mad at Mr Winters."

She just looks at him.

"No, mom, really. Dad thinks I'm one step up from a hooker. If his friends say I got, you know," Tony waves his hand because he is not saying the word 'aroused' about himself to his mother, "at a party, dad will be mad at *me*, not *them*." Duh.

"You've got a lot to learn about your father, kiddo."

The driver pulls into valet parking, which mercifully saves them from this conversation. Thank god. Tony goes to hop out first so he can open the door for her. It wins him a smile, but his mom isn't done, she grabs his hand before he can get out. "George, drive us around another little while please."

Fuck. His mom pulls the door shut again.

"Anthony, what I'm trying to tell you is that in our world, your father's world, people may use you for ends that have nothing to do with yourself."

"Mom, I know that. Believe me, I get it. You sent me to a school so strict I've never been out for pizza. *I get it*. I'm basically a sex pawn in someone else's game."

He's never seen his mom look so serious. She tucks a strand of his hair back. "Most sex pawns don't belong to companies that hold national security clearances."

Tony rolls his eyes. He can't help it. "I don't know a damn thing. Dad's seen to that."

"Honey, I'm going to lay this out for you, because heaven knows your father won't."

Tony looks at her, because he really has no idea what the hell has happened to their lunch date.

"If an alpha were to claim you, no, Anthony, be quiet. If an alpha were to claim you, it would be of national importance because of who you are and who your father is. The alpha could, through you, try to gain possession of Stark Industry's secrets."

"Yeah, because everybody's so sure I'll just babble in bed," Tony mutters.

"That's not what your father is worried about. He's worried someone unethical, from Russia or another enemy state, will try to seduce you."

"Dad should quit worrying, because I don't know anything!"

"Honey, you don't *have* to know anything. If someone else had control over you, they could hold your safety against your father."

Tony rolls his eyes at her again. "I'm sure dad would cave in a second, since he was so heartbroken when he sent me off to boarding school and dumped me there for years."

"That's unfair, honey."

"Whatever." They're back at the valet parking again, so Tony opens the door to leap out. He is so done with this conversation.

His mother yanks the door shut, and there's a brief struggle over the handle. She meets his eyes and holds on. Mom's stronger than she looks. "*I'm* worried that your father will marry you to someone in order to protect you."

Tony abruptly lets go the handle and sits back. That's a creepy thought he'd never considered before. "I figured he'd marry me off to some business guy. An oil baron or something. Get SI the mining rights he's always wanted."

"Your father isn't nearly as cold-blooded as you think. Anthony, I invited you out to lunch today so I could ask you about your future. How *you* would like to plan for it. I've got us a nice date at the club, and I thought we could talk about the people at the party. I want to find out what you thought of them. If anyone sparked your interest."

Tony's wedges his back against the Bentley's door. "You really want to know?"

"I do. I promise to listen this time." Her smile is still shaky, but determined. "Was it--did you like Dr Singh?"

Who? Oh, that guy. He'd been fine, but Tony only talked to him because he had a theoretical math PhD. "No. That's not-- No."

"Will you tell me?"

Tony really shouldn't. This is a trap. He knows this is a trap. But it's the first time his parents have actually asked him, well, anything. Tony takes a deep breath. "I want to go to college." Oh god, he's said it. "I want to attend MIT. They don't usually let us in, but I know dad can pull strings. He could make it happen. I would never ask for another favor again, I promise."

His mom's face falls. "Oh Anthony. Honey. You know you can't."

"But mom, even some of the state unis are letting omegas take classes, if they pass the entrance exams." Now that he's started talking, it all comes out. All his plans. He's leaning forward, eager to make her see. "If I got good scores, even if it wasn't MIT, there's the University of Washington--they're letting omegas get science degrees, now, if they want. It started with nursing, and they said that worked OK, and they have career advising, and tutors, and--" Tony trails off because his mom looks sick.

She's looking at him with pity. "That's just not an option for you, baby."

Baby. That's what she'd called him when he was small, when she read to him at night. There's no monsters in the closet, baby, but I'll leave the light on for you.

"Can I at least *apply*?" All the omega programs require the signature of a parent, guardian, or spouse.

"Anthony, you know it's out of the question. Where did you even get this idea?"

"Alex is going to apply."

"Alex who?"

"My best friend? Alex Richardson?" God, didn't his parents pay attention to anything in his life?

"Oh, the Richardsons. They're in finance and they have two other children. Alex isn't an only child."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Tony is so frustrated he could scream.

"Because you're going to inherent SI one day."

"Well, doesn't it make sense for me to have a degree in engineering if I'm going to inherit, I don't know, an *engineering firm?*" Tony's almost shouting, but come on.

"I didn't mean you'd inherit the leadership of SI."

Tony throws himself back in the corner and puts an arm over his face. He's so mad he could spit.

"When you have children of your own, your father and I are hoping that--"

It hurts. It hurts to hear it. Yeah, on some level Tony knows that's what his dad wants. That this is what they're riding their hopes on. "You're hoping I'll marry a nice alpha and pop out a bunch of smart alpha grandkids that dad can teach to build atom bombs."

She doesn't say anything for a while. "Sweetheart, you had to know that working at SI in any capacity as an engineer was out of the question. After a time, when you've settled down, it's possible that you could have a role there. Marketing, maybe. Or design. Stark has a very nice company art collection. Your drafting teacher says you have a strong sense of color and you're very creative. The Rhode Island School of Design has a correspondence program for omegas. You could get an associates art degree from there, while you're still at Miss Price's. Why don't we talk to your father about that? I always thought you had such a good eye for art."

Tony just stares at her, then goes back to looking out the window. At last he says, "Can we skip lunch? I have an essay due for history Monday."

No, she says, of course they can't skip lunch. Mom has the driver take them back to the museum.

It turns out that the reason they're at MoMA is the Frank Lloyd Wright architectural drawing exhibit. His mom has a pair of special passes for donors that means they get to enter the exhibit before it's open to anyone else. Tony wanders around, reading the schematics and getting ideas.

His mom follows him, going where he goes. Mostly, she's quiet, but if he stays at a particular drawing or sketch for a while, she'll ask him about it.

It would be kind of nice, if he wasn't so upset.

Tony's pretty sure that whatever she has planned for lunch is going to be miserable. The museum is to butter him up, get him off his guard. He tries to enjoy it as long as he can, but it's hard.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Thanks for the kind comments everyone! I thought I'd take a chance to mention a few things. 1) This chapter does contain some disturbing mentions of WWII, underage drinking, mentions of suicide, etc. 2) This really will have a happy ending, I promise promise promise. Tony gets to have his HEA. 3) Er, unfortunately, things are going to get quite a bit worse before they get better. 4) I've written 70K so far, which is about 1/2 of the story. It's all plotted out, and I'm hitting my word count each day. I know this is a WIP, and I'm not at all offended if you would like to wait until the story is done before reading. For those taking a chance, thank you! 5) I have decided that for the two most depressing chapters in this story, I will make an exception to my one-chapter per day schedule. I'll post the depressing chapters and the 'things start to get better' chapter all in one go so you guys don't have to wait in grimdarkland. (ie, I'll post three chapters in a single day.) If that means I have to skip a posting day to get them all edited and posted at once, I hope you will be patient with me. 6) Thank you all again for going on this journey with me. <3 to all my lovely readers!

Lunch is awkward.

The driver takes them to the club. It's posh, beautiful, and quiet. The waiter brings his mom a martini without being asked. She orders food for both of them, as well as a Jefferson's Reserve and ginger, with ice, for Tony.

It turns out to be wickedly alcoholic, with a sweet taste and a long slow burn. Tony's eyes water as he sets it back down.

Tony doesn't really like silence. He grew up in a silent house, and the best part of living at Miss Price's is that there's always noise. The young kids playing, the older kids fighting. Sometimes just people walking around and making the floorboards murmur. Tony talks to his robots, to his friends, to his teachers, to himself. It's probably on report card the school sends his parents: Anthony Edward Stark, completely unable to shut up.

"Mom, what's this lunch about? Is dad marrying me off already?" Whoops, he said it aloud again.

His mom sets her martini down. It's almost gone already. "He hasn't started any contracts. But I don't believe in reactionary strategy."

Reactionary strategy. Like getting married is war. Yikes. "He said you put together that party."

"I did." She toys with her wedding ring again. She'd be terrible at poker. "Tony, what did you think of Dr Singh?"

"Why do you keep mentioning him? He was boring."

"He has a degree in theoretical math from Oxford." She switches to spinning around the martini glass instead. "He's a kind man."

"He's got a combover," Tony says, because, well, it's true. Dr Singh is also sort of portly and grandpa-ish, and just--no. "He was wearing *khakis*."

She laughs. His mom laughs so hard she sounds a little hysterical. "He does. I know, it's horrible, isn't it?"

Oh thank god. Dr Singh and his whole epic tragicness are off the table. Tony's never had sex, but neck-petting or not, he just couldn't face it.

Then his mom said, "I invited him in particular. Honey, I know he's not the Prince Charming of your fairy tales, but I want you to consider a longterm contract with him."

Tony nearly drops the wine glass she'd ordered for him. "You--what?"

But mom is leaning forward. "He has an advanced degree in theoretical math, he's got security clearance from both the British and US governments but he's not particularly political. He comes from a good family. They're less traditional than some. His sister, Julie, let her omega get a degree from the University of London. It was after they bonded, of course, but if college is what you want, you could do a lot worse than Dr Singh."

Jesus Christ. "What does dad think of all this?"

"Your father," she says carefully, "is considering some other options for you. He likes Singh, though, and since Singh is a theory man, he's not going to bird-dog your dad about SI produces."

Tony looks down at the plate of carefully arranged food with luxurious garnishes in three colors. Tony's not hungry at all. "He'd want to get bonded straight away."

"Any alpha you marry is going to want to get bonded right away." Her voice is exasperated. "Honey, you're a beautiful boy. They'll want you to flash taken scent everywhere you go. You know this."

"But--"

"Don't but me, Anthony Edward Stark. I'm doing my level best to get you what you say want! I need you to meet me halfway."

"But if I bond with them, I'll probably get pregnant!"

"Honey." She sighs and sets her fork down. "Honey, you know that's in your future. That's what they want from us. Now, you're pretty enough and when you want to be, charming

enough, that you can catch an alpha who will indulge you. Someone like Dr Singh will let his young pretty omega go to college one day."

Tony stabbed at the boef bourginoin with his fork. "What did she get, his sister's omega?"

His mom sipped her third martini, looking pleased that he seemed interested. "Her omega got a degree in Early Childhood Education. She's even got a job now. Teaches reading in a special after school program for children who are slow. Would you like that, honey?"

It sounded like pure hell to Tony. He poked at his potatoes. "I don't know." Lying was getting easier.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Tony, baby, I know this isn't what you were dreaming about. But this is how the world works. You need to accept that."

Tony drank some more of his wine. It made his head feel warm. "What's dad planning that's so horrible?"

His mom set her martini down so fast some of it splashed on her hand. She wiped at it with a napkin. "I don't know what you mean."

"Mom." Tony shoved his plate away. He was never going to finish it. "Just fucking tell me."

"Don't swear, Anthony. It's rude."

"Mom!"

She leaned forward, shushing him. "*Anthony*."

"It's my life. I have a right to know." Tony crossed his arms over his chest, glaring.

"I suppose you do." She rubbed at her temples. "I told you that your father is worried someone will find a way to get you. Seduce you, kidnap you, something like that. Your school's security is top notch, of course, it's part of why we sent you there. They don't even allow typed parents to visit, so it's quite quite safe overall. However, you're at a vulnerable age."

Tony didn't try to point out how fucking stupid that was. At least she was telling him.

"Your father feels that you would be safer if you were bonded to someone....strong."

"Strong in what way?"

"In as many ways as it's possible to be. He's been having dinner with a lot of military men, and I believe he's also considering some civilians. He hasn't shared details with me, it's just that I know how his mind works. He's going to pick whoever he thinks will keep you safe."

Whoever would keep Stark Industries safe. Tony had no illusions about his father. Not any more.

"It's not that strong is bad," his mom says, twirling her ring again and again. "Your father is a very strong man, and of course, I'm very happy. But not all of us are so lucky as to find someone who's as tolerant as your father."

Now Tony felt ill. "Um, right."

She patted Tony's arm. "I've got a nice little get-together planned late next month. I want you and Ravi to get to know each better."

Tony wanted nothing to do with Dr Singh and his indulgent family. "OK, mom."

"Good." She smiled at him and when the waiter came by, she had him top up Tony's glass of wine.

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One of the school guards has to help Tony back to his room. He's stumbling, and his head hurts, and he can't remember much after the second after-lunch drink.

His mom's friends had stopped by for the drinks portion of their lunch date. Three omegas, all wealthy, all stunning beautiful, all permanently bonded now. She'd arranged to have them come for drinks so Tony could hear more about how things 'actually worked'. Her friends cheerfully argued about different options. Short-term marriages, longterm lease-to-buy contracts (that's what they'd called them--gross), letting Tony test out a few options with someone discrete (he still cannot believe his mother agreed with Daniel about that). They all told him college was out of the question unless he wanted a nice little degree in something safe, why not consider home economics or art.

He ended up falling asleep on a couch in the club, head pillowed on someone's suitcoat, while they had more drinks.

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The next day, Tony has a brutal hangover and a lecture from Na Anderson about underage drinking.

*

Tony has social studies with Na Caruso. He's still a little under the weather, but whether it's from the massive hangover or staying up half the night making sure his molds turned out OK, Tony doesn't know--or care.

He's propped his chin on his hand, half-drowsing. Tony knows history and social studies are important, but compared to his destroyed dreams of MIT, they're nothing. Meaningless. Pointless.

He absently doodles a chemical formula on his notepaper. God, he could sleep for a *week*.

There's a rustle as all his classmates turn to the door. Tony gives himself a shake, yawns, and turns.

Na Caruso is standing next to one of the oldest old-ladies Tony has ever seen. She's got wild white frizzed hair in a poof around her head, like a dandelion. She's wearing one of those velour track suits old people sometimes favor, in bright magenta with light pink track-stripes. Bright hazel eyes sparkle at the class through her bifocals. There's enough bling on her necklace to fund, well, whatever you want funded. Tony doesn't remember seeing that many diamonds even at dad's parties. Maybe their zircon.

"Thank you so much for being willing to come today, Sa Spenser." Na Caruso is leading her to a chair parked in front the white board at the front of the class.

"It's my pleasure, dear."

While Sa Spenser sits down (a procedure that takes a while, since she has to set her cane just so about six times), Na Caruso starts handing out books. They're small-batch printed, Tony can tell, with wire binding and a boring font. Surprisingly, the book is in color. Omega Lines of Western Europe: An Overview. The author is listed as Elizabeth Louise Ambrosia Spenser.

Tony flips to the back--yes, there's a picture of the little old lady, but next to it is a photo from a much earlier time. A gorgeous blonde woman in a flapper dress, cigarette-holder poised, hair bobbed, looking like a million bucks. Tony thinks the photo is familiar but he can't place it. Betsy Ambrosia 1926 is written across the photo in perfect old-fashioned penmanship. Betsy's dress is quite long, but it's got a slit all the way up the thigh, and she's showing off her garter belt and the top of her stockings.

Tony's kind of dismayed to realize that he's thinking 'I'd hit that' about some little old lady.

Sa Spenser clears her throat, and Tony glances to the front of the room guiltily.

"Good afternoon, class." She seems to be waiting for an answer, and when she gets a few 'hi' and 'hello', she tries again. "Good afternoon, class."

About half the class choruses "Good afternoon" back.

That seems to satisfy her, because she launches into her lecture.

Omega lines have grown and faded throughout history, she tells them, but in this lecture, she's only going to hit the highlights of the lines in Western Europe and some of the Americas, focusing on the last century. The most famous lines of all, the Kallista, the Nefertaris, and the Longs, have all been lost to history.

Who the hell are the Kallista, the Nefertaris, and the Longs? Tony wonders, looking around. No one else seems to know either. If Na Caruso knows, she's not saying, she's too busy handing out books.

"And so it was, during the Great War, that the ferocity of the Heather line was cemented into memory. The Heathers were from England, as I'm sure you know, but some of them married into French alpha lines. As trench warfare worsened, and lines became more and more dug in, it was a Heather, Sa Evan Heather Taylor, who began work on strategy with the newly

developed tanks. During the Great War, over eighty Heathers were enlisted in the British armies, most in the tank divisions, although three were in the aerial corps. At the end of the conflict, sixty five Heathers had died in battle. Two more perished after their bondeds died. It was said that Heathers did not start fights, but ended them. They became famous for quick manoevers that relied on speed instead of strength.

"While of course considered enemies during the conflict, the other side was not without its share of heroics. The German omega line Garten, or Garden, has long been considered the reason that so many of the world's finest military strategists come from Germany. While not strategists themselves, the Gartens have protected and comforted the finest military minds. Gartens are considered extremely passionate, hot blooded, and honorable. Sadly, many of them perished at their own hands during the early-middle part of the century.

"During the early part of the century, a young line of omegas emerged who produced both health in their families and a curious turn of mind. I speak of the Wilcoxes."

The lights dimmed and on the screen, Tony looked at a series of photos. Brown hair, neat suits or plain dresses, the Wilcoxes looked American and ordinary and middle-class.

"During the lulls between the wars, the Wilcoxes began a number of social projects. Emerest College in Ohio specialized in omega reproductive health. The midwifery pioneered there is still used today. The Wilcoxes were also instrumental in various WPA projects, farming co-ops, and publicly funded radio stations."

Tony stares at the screen as Sa Spenser continues to talk. She tells them about the Woodruffs and the Greens and the little-known Santiagos. Tony looks at photos of the Martens, named after the fierce animal, and thinks of his friend Melody--she has that exact same nose and the exact same eye-shape and the thick brown hair.

It's a shock to look up and see more pictures that look familiar. A *lot* more familiar.

"Perhaps most famous of all, at least in certain circles, is the Demeter line. These omegas are considered the closest the modern age has come to the great lines of the past. All children of Demeter omegas, but especially body-born children, are remarkly healthy even if the type-parent had a known genetic disorder. "

Tony stares at the photos on the screen. Not very tall, mousy-brown or blond hair, clear green or blue eyes, a slight bump in the nose. All of the omegas on the screen are dressed in ridiculously beautiful clothes. Perfect suits, fine dresses, jewels. Some of the pictures are paintings--one done by Seargeant of a female Demeter holding her young son against her hip, eyes meeting the viewer's squarely.

None of the Demeters are what someone today might consider beautiful, per se, but they all have strong gazes, bold eyes.

"Although this was not revealed publicly until only two decades ago, the Demeter line was important for the Super-Soldier project. Given that Demeters could, and did, produce exceptionally healthy children, it is believed that their genetic line is unusually stable."

Tony stares at the screen, thinking. Yes, remove the bold dresses, swap in floppy sweaters or heavy plaid, cut that hair short...

"Unfortunately, the Allies were not the only ones working towards such ends. A few Demeters were captured by Nazis in the early days of the War. Once word began to spread, the Demeters--" Sa Spenser stops talking, clears her throat. "The Demeters who were unable to seek asylum made certain they would not be used for those ends. Over one hundred and seventeen Demeters are known to have committed suicide within one week of each other."

The screen shifts to another view. A scattering of photographs, none more recent than the mid-forties. All the eyes are hard, the mouths tight. It's the same family, Tony can tell.

"Sa Renee Demeter Albert, who you see on the left, was kidnapped from Boston Massachussets where she was volunteering for medical study under the care of physicians at Harvard. After her disappearance, and against the advice of the Allied governments the remaining Demeters also chose to remove their line from availability. As it were."

"No known Demeter-line omegas remain."

Tony closes his book. The rest of the class keeps looking at Sa Spenser, rapt, as she tells tales of the other great omega-lines of modern history. He lets the stories fill his head, shuts his eyes.

Sa Spenser doesn't mention the Roanoke line, but when class is over, Tony feels her eyes linger on him as he leaves.

Alone in his room, Tony flips to the back of the book. There's an appendix that lists various sources, another one that lists important American omega lines. Roanoke isn't there, either. He finds it under the fifth appendix list: Twenty Most Influencial Omega Lines, where the Kallista (classical Greek), Nefertaris (phaoronic Egyptian), and Long (early imperial Chinese) lines are listed. Roanoke: tenacious, clever, impeccably healthy.

Huh.

Padding down the hall in his bare feet, Tony goes to Na Anderson's door. It's open, and she's in her small living area, reading. He stands there for a moment, until she looks up. She's been tugging at her hair again, little spikes stand up. "Na Stark," she says and smiles happily. "Come in, I've got the latest Journal of Aerodynamics. You would not believe the tests they ran on this model plane!"

Tony flops down on the floor at her feet. She hands him down the journal. It's already ear-marked and scribbled in.

"Na Anderson," he asks, flipping through the journal absently. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yup."

Tony looks at her neat printing. It's very like his, a draftsman's hand, each letter distinct and readable. "We had a lecture in social studies today. About omega lines."

She swings her feet up over the arm of her chair, cradles her mug, blows on her tea to cool it. "And?"

"I heard, a while ago, that I'm a specific line."

"A Roanoke. You are. It's in your file. Is that your question?"

He cranes his head, looks up at her. "No."

Na Anderson just blows on her tea some more.

"My my mom said I can't go to MIT." He says it flat, hard, low. It hurts, like his stomach is on fire. Like the hangover is back. He curls forward, head on his knees.

There's a gentle brush to his hair. "It's OK, Tony. I didn't get to go to school, either. We'll figure something out."

He makes a strangled sound against his knees. He wants to scream. She doesn't pull her hand away, just strokes his hair.

After a long time, he rubs his cheeks against the soft fabric of his pajama pants. He sniffs hard. When Na Anderson hands him the mug of tea, he takes it. "It's so fucking *unfair*."

"I know."

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There's nothing Na Anderson can do about going to college. She's not a parent or guardian, and it's not like MIT is exactly hoping omegas will apply.

But when Tony shuffles down to the workshop after his usual classes are over, Na Anderson's got a fresh stack of lab notebooks on one of the workbenches. "Oh, am I grading again?"

"Nope." She sets two pencils down on the stack of notebooks. "You're going through these, and we're going to find a project that you like."

Tony grabs the first notebook, starts flipping through it. It's his own handwriting, but from years ago, before he perfected his neat architectural style. "Why? Did I screw up somehow? I'm a creature of the future, not the past. A phoenix, a--"

"Yes, yes, you're a beautiful bird of fire and flame." She grabs a notebook for herself. "It's time you had some credits under your belt."

"Credits," Tony says stupidly. His heart is suddenly pounding. "Like, *college* credits?"

"Nope."

Tony's heart thuds down to his shoes. Of course not.

"Academic credits. Journal articles published under your own name. There's more than one way to get knowledge in the world, Tony."

His hand stills on the notebook.

"You can *learn* knowledge," Na Anderson says. "Like when I showed you how to weld. Or, you can *create* knowledge. "

"Like when we made that alloy from the new ore your friend sent." They'd cracked a mold, which had been kind of alarming because it started the workbench on fire, but they'd had a hell of a good time.

"Yes. What you need, my lad, is a string of academic credits as long as your arm."

"Can I publish if I haven't graduated from high school yet?"

She just raises one eyebrow. "I don't know, Na Stark. Can you?"

Right. Tony pulls the stack of old lab notebooks closer. Partway through his old tests on alloys, he looks up. "Has my dad published anything?"

"Yup." Her smile is wicked. "But not as often as I have."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay, everyone. I'm busily editing the big three-chapter post, and it's taking a bit longer than I hoped. They're some of the most crucial chapters of the story, and I really don't want to screw them up, so I had to rewrite parts a couple times. This chapter (chapter 6) is the last chapter before grimdark hits. I hope to post the two grim chapters and the third (happier) chapter either tomorrow or Friday, then we should be back to once-a-day updates.

The next eleven months are busy. Tony's begun work on experimental solders under Na Anderson's careful direction. She helps him plan each section of the process, but she insists that he make all critical decisions himself.

It's fun, but exhausting.

On the weekends, Tony is either trying to catch up on homework, trying to catch up on sleep, or going to excruciating social events his parents organize.

Mom's plan to hook him up with the nice but boring Dr Singh is lurching along. Tony's getting more and more nervous about dad's as yet unknown plans. Or diabolical evil machination, DEM, as Tony has taken to calling it.

"What news on the DEM?" Alex calls whenever Tony gets back from these depressing shindigs. "Fuck any four-star generals?"

"Very funny," Tony says, yanking off his tie. Actually, it had been kind of a close call with one of the air force guys. He'd nearly been trapped in the hallway, but the school chaperone had, fortunately, followed him out. Score: Greatest US military tactical mind of his generation: 0, Miss Price Nosey-Narker: 1.

"But seriously man, have your folks calmed their panties yet?"

"No," Tony says and he slams the door to his room shut in his best friend's face.

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It's probably the cocktails that do it, Tony decides later. He would never have the courage if he wasn't drunk off his ass. The very nice waiters have been bringing him shit in glass tumblers all evening, and Tony's been sipping it. He isn't actually trying to get hammered, but the old fogey crowd have iron livers. Tony gets toasted just trying to keep up.

It's a rare moment of quiet. Half the guests at the dinner party have gone to inspect some garden something-or-other. The remaining female guests have all hit the loo to repair makeup. Most of the guys are off looking at the host's gun collection. Tony would have liked to peek in the garage, because the Firths supposedly have a vintage Olds, but his dad's gimlet stare is something else. He'd stayed right where he was, smack dab in the middle of the wood-paneled study.

Dad's wandering around the edges of the room, looking at the books and the art and generally frowning. Tony wonders if he's inventing rockets or bombs or bullets.

"Um, dad?"

Howard Stark turns his dark glare on his son. It's....imposing.

"How come you didn't want to look at the gun collection? The other guests were saying Mr Firth has a lot of specialty rifles." Tony really loathes small talk, but he's learned the hard way that his father considers long silences from his son to be rude. Something about omegas being charming. OK, dad.

Howard checks to make sure the study door is shut. It is, because Tony had shut it himself.

"Firth has a few good pieces, but his new favorite is a Russian semi-automatic. It's going to blow his hand off one of these days."

Tony blinks. "Yikes."

"He'd have wanted me to ooh and ah over it, and I need his goodwill." Howard shrugs. "I'm probably going to have to fix it for him in the end."

"What's wrong with it?" Tony knows his dad is one of the finest engineering minds in the world, but it can be hard to get him to talk. It's like pulling teeth.

"I haven't inspected it." It's short, curt.

Tony's taken hours of deportment, though, and his dad is only human. "Yeah, but you know already."

Howard's eyes narrow, then he shrugs. "The Russians can have good designs, but their production lines are inconsistent. Poor alloys or faulty molds. I'll probably have to remake half the parts."

It sounds like fun to Tony, but he doesn't say that. He knows he's hit the end of the line with this topic, but if he doesn't fill the silence, Howard will. "Dad, since we're alone, there's something I wanted to ask you."

Howard leaves his inspection of the cheap hunting scene (knockoff, they've had classes on how to tell real paintings from imitations) to pace over to Tony. "Is this about your mother's party?"

"Oh no, nothing like that." Like Tony's idiot enough to tell his father anything personal ever. Much less a criticism of his mother. "It's about something I learned in school."

"Oh?" Howard's gone wary, like a predatory hawk, searching for prey.

"We had a special speaker on omega lines." This was probably such a bad idea, but it's the only topic Tony knows is usually safe. He'd already blown through the weather, fashion (yeah, right), cars, SI business (quit talking about things you don't understand, boy), and news of the day (Tony had stuck with the Queen's new corgi puppies).

"Ah, this is about the Roanokes." Howard's body language eases slightly. "Your mother is a Roanoke. Very old line. You should be proud to be a part of it."

"No," Tony says, because holy shit that wasn't what he meant to talk about oh god, help. "I mean, I am proud, yes, the Roanokes are cool, aren't they? But in school they were talking about this other line, one I hadn't heard of, and I thought maybe the speaker was wrong, or not wrong, but maybe there was more to the story, but I wasn't sure, and--" he runs out of air. Fuck.

"You didn't contradict them, did you?"

"Oh no, I just thought I'd ask you, because you were there. I thought maybe the information we had was just incomplete. She only mentioned it in passing, and I was taking notes pretty fast, and I didn't have time to clarify, and it's not in the books, but I thought, you know, maybe, possibly--" There was a line of sweat trickling down his spine.

His dad tilts his head. "Is this about the Demeters?"

Oh thank the tiny baby Jesus. "Yes."

"What did they tell you?" Howard's eyes are dark, sharp.

"That the Demeters were important to the Super-Soldier project."

"That is correct. Was that your question?"

"Kind of," Tony admits. He has a theory, but he doesn't know how safe it is to ask even a general question of his father.

His father is staring now, intent.

This was such a bad idea. "I wondered if the Demeter line is the reason the success wasn't ever repeated."

Howard is still. It's kind of menacing, actually. "That is my current working hypothesis, yes."

"Oh." Tony frowns. "That kind of sucks, since the Demeters vanished." Well, mostly vanished.

"Anthony," his father says, not moving, eyes glittering sharp in his narrow face, "what did the school tell you about the remaining Demeters?"

"Oh," Wait--was he not supposed to know this? Fuck. Help. "Well, they said that the Demeters didn't want to be captured by the enemy."

"That is correct."

"And so they, you know, um." That stare is really getting to him. "That they killed themselves. So they couldn't be used that way."

"Yes." Howard cocks his head, looks Tony up and down, frowns more deeply. "They killed themselves."

"I guess no more Super-Soldiers." Tony isn't sure what else to say, and his dad is just doing this weird fixated glare. Tony realizes the back of his shirt is sticky with sweat.

"Not unless there are more Demeters. Are there any more Demeters, Anthony?"

Tony's stomach flips and rolls. OK, his father is just scaring him now. "No, dad. We learned that they killed themselves. Well, except for one who got kidnapped. From somewhere."

"Harvard," Howard says absently. "Are you *lying* to me, Anthony?"

"No!" Tony takes a step back, and god, he hopes it isn't a tell. But that stare is really starting to freak him out. "No, dad, that's what they told us, I *swear*. We didn't learn anything classified. I just thought it was a sad story, and I knew you worked on the project, and I thought you might know if it was true. I'm not lying, dad, I promise."

Howard's nostrils flare suddenly and he straightens slowly. "All right, Anthony. There's no need for you to be so frightened. Starks don't show fear. Always remember that."

"OK," Tony says, and it comes out as a squeak, but come on. He's doing his best.

"The Firths have a classic Oldsmobile Cutlass. It's in their lower level garage. I want to take a look. Come along, Anthony. And bring the whiskey."

Tony grabs the bottle and his father's glass. While his father's back is turned, Tony takes a large slug straight from the bottle.

Next time, he's going to try the list of '101 Safe Conversation Topics For Difficult People' from their damn textbook. His teacher's advice to pick a topic of particular interest to the difficult person had backfired on his ass. Jesus Christ.

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On the drive back, Tony curls up in the corner seat while his dad enthuses about the Cutlass to his mom. "It's not the 455 cu, of course," Howard says.

"Of course," Maria murmurs, smiling at him.

"But it's the 400 and it's in good shape."

"You should ask him how much he wants for it," Maria says.

"'s got a busted head gasket," Tony murmurs. God, he's drunk. But it was nice, puttering on the engine with his dad. "Sucks."

Howard sighs agreement. "Anthony pointed out this faint ping and after some work, I traced to a telltale crack. Nothing fatal, not yet, but not ideal."

"So talk Firth into a discount."

Howard hmms, obviously considering it. Tony drifts off to the comfortable noise of his parents bickering. He'd really liked that car, he hopes mom wins.

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The next day brings another brutal hangover, another lecture from Na Anderson, and sadly, the information that three of his solder tests failed. Dammit.

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It's another month and a half before the next social appointment. Tony's kind of surprised, because his mom had been on a mission (from hell) to get him shacked up.

While all the extra time (ha), Na Anderson ropes him into helping with the decorations for the school Christmas Pageant/Winter Festival/Random Snow Day/Holiday Show.

She asks him every year, and every year he bitches and moans and complains, and is secretly delighted to be asked. Possibly she knows this.

"But why animatronic *donkeys*?" he asks her, leaning over the workbench to study her plans. Part of the fun is finding out what crazed ideas she's got for the decorations. His favorite is still the snow fairies. They'd been hidden all over the auditorium, then popped out like clockwork soldiers, spewed snow-like flakes and glitter into the air, sung an actually not that bad cover of 'Let it Snow' (Na Anderson likes good rock guitar), and then vanished in puffs of purple smoke (actually going back into their hiding places).

"Why *not* animatronic donkeys?" she retorts.

Tony has to admit that it's a reasonable question, as these things go. He thinks about it. Why is he against them? "They bray. It's too limiting, artistically speaking." Na Anderson believes in science, but she also believes in the importance of Style and Art, especially during holiday decoration season. Each of the snow fairies had to be different, even if no one else could see the detail. ("*I* will know," she'd said darkly. "We are craftsmen, Na Stark, not cheap designers. We take pride in our work." "OK," he'd said, and made each of the wings a different shape.)

"I wasn't planning to have them bray, but you make a good point. If they're donkeys, our audience will expect braying."

Tony peers at the drawings she's made. Her designs are often deceptively simple, but tricky to make. She always assumes a high level of skill in her production team (i.e., Tony). "What if we make them unicorns? Keep the shape, size down the ears."

"Then how will our audience know when the ears swivel at the stroke of midnight? Na Taylor specifically asked for some big signal to the audience to look at the back of the hall. That's where the procession of little ones will be."

"Hmm. We could do elephants. They're gifted in the ear department."

"Elephant ears flap, they don't swivel."

After much discussion, Na Anderson decides that unicorn horns will be enough of a signal. As per usual, she vetoes Tony's idea for them to breath fire, but decides they can risk lights in the tip of the unicorn horns. If the stage manager dims everything, the unicorns can turn, and then it'll be like a spotlight on the parade of small children in glittery white sheet outfits singing carols.

Tony's happy to get to work on the motors that turn the unicorn necks, glad this year's project gives him enough room to work. The flying sparrows had been a bitch that way.

He's sitting in his room, tiny parts spread on his bed, when one of the kids manning the phone comes to get him. "It's your mom again, Tony."

Then she wanders off. Tony wipes absently at his face, smearing grease on his chin.

"This is Anthony Stark speaking, how may I help you?" Maybe he should swap out the design that relies on cables and switch to a more vertebrae approach. Then the unicorns can swivel back more easily.

"Tony, darling, how are you?" She sounds tired tonight.

"I'm fine, mom, how are you?" Tony asks it automatically.

"I'm doing well, darling. What are you up to this afternoon?"

Tony looks down at himself. His ratty blue tee shirt is streaked with various chemicals, lubricants, and some kind of black powder. There's a tiny screw stuck to his sleeve with what appears to be a bit of pizza sauce. "Nothing, mom. What's up?"

"Don't use slang, darling. I'm going to be send the driver for you at 10 am this Saturday. Wear the burgundy silk and the black jeans, pumps, and your father's cufflinks. Oops, dear, I have to run."

She's hung up before Tony can answer. Only one answer is acceptable, and if he has other plans, too bad. He sighs and puts the phone back in the cradle. Time to tell Na Anderson he'll be out this weekend doing god knows what.

*

Tony's dressed in the appointed outfit, dread cufflinks included despite their gaudiness, on the slated time. He spends the drive into the city working out a better way to articulate some joints and also fills out his social studies homework (major cities of the world, borrrrrring).

His mom slides in next to him when they hit the hotel she often stays at. "Anthony, darling, don't you look nice!"

Does he? He's forgotten, distracted by the work. "Thanks, mom."

She chatters away, nonsense updates about people he doesn't care about. Tony memorizes it all, just in case. When they pull up to a curb, he's curious. There's a somewhat worrying phalanx of men in black suits, white shirts, and dark blue ties. "Something you're not telling me, mom?"

"Surprise!" She drags him out of the car. They're at a movie theater, and it's showing all three of the new Star Wars. "Your father sent them, just to be on the safe side. Come on, darling."

Tony lets her haul him inside. The goon squad, their usual driver, and the school chaperone create a hell of a dark-suited throng. It sure does make the line at the concessions stand disappear, though.

As Tony sits next to his mother in one of the seats, he does his best to memorize everything. The sticky floor, the fake gold cherubs, the cycling advertisements for soda and used cars and insurance. He's not going to get another chance for years, and he wants to enjoy every second of it.

She's probably brought him here because of some other bad news. But maybe not. Tony tries not to second guess himself and enjoy the moment.

When she takes his hand and squeezes it, he squeezes back.

Yeah, it's a pretty good moment.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Tony returns to school as usual, but he doesn't hear from his parents for another three weeks. When he does, it's a short curt note from his father telling him to pack for a three day vacation in the Hamptons. They're celebrating.

What is not exactly clear.

Tony throws himself on the mercy of one of the Deportment teachers, since his mom doesn't answer his frantic phone call. The teacher helps him pack, gives him some conversation ideas, and generally tries to calm him down--which makes him even more tense.

The driver picks Tony up on a Friday morning, and it's only then that Tony discovers there will be no school chaperone. It's terrifying. Whatever is happening, it really was planned by his father.

The Stark estate in the Hamptons is large, plush, ridiculous. The 'celebration' is for some kind of military award given to his dad, no surprise there. The guest lists is over sixty people, staying overnight, and Tony's glad it's not worse. He's able to change from his day suit to a more casual sweater-pants-dress shoes combo, but other than that, he's busy the first two days smiling and chatting, while his mother avoids him, and his father eyes him with a hawklike stare that makes the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

*

Tony doesn't much enjoy the beach, which is cold, sandy, and smelly. He does his best to pretend he's having a wonderful time, smiling until his cheeks ache and listening attentively to the pompous opinions of endless blowhards. God, it's dull.

It's the last of this miserable 'vacation' and Tony's getting tired of the sweet-sick smell of margarita mix and the sticky feel of spilled champagne that seems to linger over everything. He nurses a blessedly-strong cup of coffee and wishes he was home in his workshop. Instead, he's in the breakfast room (Jesus Christ) of his parents' damn mansion, being ogled by a woman old enough to be his mother. He hopes she won't pinch his ass, the way someone yesterday did.

Tony's about ready to decide that retreat is the better part of valor (her eyes keep sweeping up and down, like he's some kind of delicious treat, gross), when his dad's business partner comes in.

Tony remembers Obie (vaguely) from the days he actually lived with his parents. Big, loud, smelling of cigars. That's about it.

Dad's sure fond of him, though, which means Tony must be on his very best behavior.

Obie calls a booming hello that echoes through the whole damn breakfast room; Tony smiles and offers coffee. It's something he's supposed to do; he's a Stark, and this is a Stark party. Obie's expression when he tells Tony how he likes his coffee and what he wants for breakfast makes it clear that Obie is taking it as submissive flirting, which it isn't. Tony would probably get the shit kicked out of him if he says anything, so he makes Obie's coffee (cream, two sugars) and breakfast plate (eggs, ham, bacon, sausage) and carries it over without a word.

Obie sets it down at a place at the table, slings his arm around Tony's shoulders. It brings his elbow in sharp contact with the back of Tony's neck. Tony's got the advanced books now, he knows it's one of his erogenous zones, also knows Obie probably doesn't intend to get Tony instantly and achingly hard in his jeans, knows he has to keep it together.

Obie's saying something, but Tony can't even hear it, because Obie's leaning in close and Tony's getting a sharp whiff of Obie's neck and *oh god*.

Tony's hopelessly turned on, and he makes a tiny needy noise that he did not want to make, and then Obie is saying something again, leading Tony towards the door. Tony is going, confused and seasick and lost. He's been touched there before, he's even smelled full-on alpha arousal before, why is this happening, it shouldn't be.

From far away, Tony hears a click-clack of crisp heels marching down the hall. Is that lady leaving? No, she was inside, it must be someone else. Tony's body is so confused, and he feels about ready to throw up, actually, and he would if he weren't so damn hard.

His mother is suddenly in front of him, face white and stark, then she's gone again. Tony hears the words from far, far away. Wasn't his mom supposed to be taking the ladies for an early golf game? Maybe it was rained out. But it's not raining. God, Tony can't remember anything, feel anything, and he's slowly losing track of his knees.

Vaguely, Tony hears words, but they don't matter.

"...bad shrimp in the cocktail." His mother, *furious*, but polite, voice still sweet.

"Just taking him to lie down." Obie? Maybe.

"I know where you were taking him. Put him in that chair right here. Do it *now*."

And Tony's being lowered, which is great, it is, except that he's sort of losing track of things. He slides out of the chair, and his knees hit the floor. It's jarring and painful and something else in his belly rebels. He wretches helplessly, coughing and choking and vomiting all over.

*

Tony wakes up briefly in bed when his mother gives him some kind of medicine from a spoon. He feels wretched, and he knows it's a heat, which is excruciatingly embarrassing, but it's not the kind he's had before. It's like a pre-heat combined with a bad flu. Tony spends it throwing up and shaking with fever.

The only consolation is the memory of throwing up on his father's suddenly-appearing shoes.

*

He gets sent back to school, where he's thoroughly checked over. The school nurse checks him for a number of illicit substances while Tony sits slumped on her paper-covered exam bench. None are found. She tells him that he probably had a breakthrough heat due to excessive stress, which can happen to sensitive omegas, particularly from certain lines, of which he is one. The short-term medical recommendation for breakthrough heats is rest and stress reduction. The long-term medical recommendation is for a bond-based marriage, which will stabilize most omega's heat cycles and usually improves various hormone functions.

Tony listens woozily, then staggers off to bed. He takes a few (quite disgusting) samples of his own, but never gets around to testing them. First, because he's too sick. Then, because he's too busy.

*

Tony gets married for the first time when he's sixteen. Technically, the contract is drawn up when he's fifteen, but it doesn't kick in for another couple months.

The school secretary, Cindy, shows up in his Advanced Practical Mathematics class. She goes straight to where he's sitting, without even talking to the teacher first. "Come with me, Tony."

Tony doesn't want to because they're doing pretty cool proofs today, but he doesn't argue. Cindy looks ill or gray or stretched. Something odd. Upset, he decides. She doesn't talk at all, just takes him to the headmaster's room. Cindy leaves, closing the door behind her.

Na Everly is old, pushing seventy, but he's pretty spry. Tony's been in here before, a bunch of times, and he always got the feeling that Headmaster Everly is more amused by his pranks than angry about them. Except for the time he exploded the soccer field, but that was totally an accident.

"Tony, I have some difficult news for you."

And that's how Tony learns that both his parents have been killed in a car crash, along with their driver and some friend of dad's.

The week after that is a blur. He has to go out into the world, but the school sends a teacher and two bodyguards. The teacher is Sa Honeycutt, who teaches Deportment to the lower grades. She understands all the complicated stuff about will readings and wakes and company memorial dinners. What to wear, what to say, how to write thank you notes for condolence gifts.

She also helps him deal with the questions that Obie asks. What kind of flowers Tony thinks his parents would like for their caskets. How the hell should he know? He's barely seen them in years. Sa Honeycutt suggests a few traditional combinations. Tony picks white roses

and lilies from her recommendations. Tony thinks Obie is just as relieved as he is about Sa Honeycutt's extensive knowledge of upper class etiquette.

Tony barely remembers the flurry of people he meets during all of this. Business partners, scientists, researchers, politicians, statesmen, military men, charity heads, and a few female omegas that Tony kind of suspects were his dad's mistresses.

He does remember the private will reading.

It's just him, Sa Honeycutt as chaperone, and three lawyers who look so old they're possibly animated corpses. Not even Obie is allowed to attend.

There are some personal bequests--books, a car, knickknacks, paintings--to various acquaintances, including Obie. The bulk of Howard's fortune falls to Anthony Edward Stark.

Tony is so exhausted that he barely reacts. Well, who else would they leave it to? There is no one else. Dad didn't really have friends, and it's not like Dad approved of the few friends his mom managed to make.

But as Tony is sitting there, zoning out, his mind starts translating the legalese that the lawyer is still reading aloud. There's something about a stipend, which Tony expected, but the bit about 'until a suitable permanent marriage has been made' is unexpected.

"I'm sorry," Tony says, sounding not the least bit sorry, "but could you repeat that bit? I think maybe you were temporarily possessed by a ghost from medieval England."

The lawyer looks over his reading glasses at Tony. "It's a standard provision for omega wards, Na Stark. But I will be happy to read it again."

Tony listens much more closely this time. The will states that Tony will keep going to school at Miss Price's Academy. He will have a suitable stipend for spending money, but Obie will have full control of Tony's assets, including his SI shares. Obie will help Tony consider a fulfilling life path after graduation from Miss Price's.

Apparently, Dad had heard about Tony's dreams of MIT, because he's got a whole paragraph devoted to forbidding Tony from attending there. How, Tony wonders, can even his dad be such an asshole from *the grave*?

It turns out Tony's forbidden from attending a lot of places, not just MIT. Tony's beginning to feel sick shame fill his stomach, twisting with the grief into unpleasant knots.

The lawyer turns a page and clears his throat. "I believe this explanatory section, written by your mother, will help you understand that the clauses about your education and the moral clauses further on are intended to protect you personally as well as your family legacy and the many people who have worked so hard to make the Stark name a byword of military prowess."

So much for thinking his mom didn't know about this idiocy. Tony nods jerkily. "OK."

"Darling," the lawyer reads, "if you're hearing this, the worst has happened. No matter what you think now, I want you to know that this is intended to protect you.

"I know you've dreamed of college, and it must seem cruel for us to take that dream away."

No shit, Tony thinks.

"But you've been sheltered, darling. That's a blessing and a curse. More blessing than curse, I hope. If you went to college, your father is afraid that you would be taken advantage of by an ambitious alpha."

Like he isn't going to be taken advantage of if he sticks to cooking classes at a junior college? Jesus Christ, his parents are idiots.

"Tony, as an omega, you can't run Stark Industries yourself while the company is so dependent on Department of Defense contracts. Obie has agreed to run the company in your interest for several years, but that obviously can't continue indefinitely. It wouldn't be fair to him.

"The problem is that a lot of people will see you as a way to marry into a CEO position. Once you marry, your spouse will be your legal guardian and in control of those shares. Not only is Stark Industries a very wealthy company, Tony, but it has access to information critical to national security.

Who you date is literally a matter of national military importance."

Tony feels the sick shame burn into his throat. He stares at the floor, because everyone in the room is looking at him. His parents think he would actually compromise the country's security to get laid.

"But darling," the lawyer says, droning words that Tony knows should be spoken in his mom's soft lilt, "we want you to be happy. There are so many people in our social circle who would make a wonderful partner for you and who would also benefit the company."

Tony's heart is beating faster. Was his mother implying what he thought she might be implying? That somehow he was supposed to marry for the sake of the company?

"If you went to college, you'd be too vulnerable to the wrong kind of people. Young alphas eager to make their first big conquest, politically minded hippies who'd want you to donate everything to PETA, your dad made me write down that one but I suppose it does make sense although I can't see you with someone from PETA dear, and professors who want to make themselves chair of the department based on a big endowment.

"It's really very admirable that you're so interested in science and technology. I'm sure it will make it easier to talk to your spouse. Lord knows I barely understand half of what your father says. But it's OK to be your own person, Tony, and to follow your own dreams. A good partner will encourage that.

"I know that you've really done well at Miss Price's. They have a post-grad program where omegas can take correspondence courses at some universities in certain programs. We'd like you to consider that option. Even if you have a few short-term marriage contracts, you should still be able to get an associate's degree from a reputable institution without exposing yourself to too much risk. Miss Price's will put your studies on hold during a contract and you can pick up right where you left off when you return.

"Your teachers are very proud of your drafting ability and they say you're a very creative designer. Your father talks about the military branch of SI all the time--alllll the time--but Stark has more than just weaponry. Did you know that some of the best music players, phones, professional art printers, and personal computers are made by Stark? Don't be ashamed of your artistic side, Tony, it's one of your greatest strengths."

Tony wants to sink into the floor. His mom is giving him the 'it's OK if you're too stupid to do math' talk. It's brutally humiliating. "How much longer is this damn digression?"

The lawyer looks severely disapproving. "Your mother's letter is another page and a half."

Oh god. Tony shuts his eyes tight. "Just get on with it. Summarize if you can. I'll read the damn thing later."

The lawyer clears his throat. He doesn't summarize, and years later, Tony can still recall the whole humiliating missive by heart.

Tony is supposed to be a good little omega and attend a nice distance college program in art, design, or some other soft subject that will play to Tony's strengths.

If Tony wants, he can also take some practical subjects, like cooking and childcare.

Right, because Tony is going to be home, making cookies and burping babies. His head aches.

The next section is even more appalling. Obie, of all people, is to help guide Tony through the difficult shoals of the marriage process. His mom wants Tony to have a happy marriage, and she is sure in her heart that a permanent bond is the best thing for her baby boy. But, his mom added, she also understands how things work for omegas when they were young. Tony's skin crawls. Except for a brief traumatic birds and the bees talk, Tony likes to pretend his parents did not even know sex existed. His mom burbles on, blue-black ink flourishing with her passionate handwriting.

Given Tony's youth, she says, she wants Obie to help him negotiate a few short term marital contracts to start. Not too many, but enough so that he doesn't spend all his heats alone.

Tony shuts his eyes. Mooooooooooooooom.

The last part of her letter concerns what Tony should look for in a spouse. Kindness, his mom insists, is the most important. Looks, money, smarts, all those are nice things to have, but worthless without kindness. Tony wondered how the hell he's supposed to find anyone when his parents have so many damn requirements.

Naturally, Obie will have final say until Tony is 21 over all Tony's marriages. After 21, unless the moral clause is invoked, Tony will begin making his own decisions. It will start with 5% of Tony's Stark Industries stock the first year, and increase each year until Tony has complete control over all his company stock and his own damn body--at thirty.

Unless he's bonded, in which case, hey, his bond mate has already assumed full control of his corpse--but not, it turns out, Tony's money or assets.

Stark Industries stock is harder to get than Tony's ass. Which is just like dad, putting his priorities in clear order.

A spouse gets control of Tony's ass on the day of their permanent marriage or upon proof of a bond.

Control of Stark Industries happens later, depending on various moral clauses, Obie's possible consent and/or being alive, the Stark Industries board of directors, his spouse's good standing and/or moral fibre, his spouse's formal education (doctorate in engineering or an MBA from Wharton preferred), and so on.

Tony throws his arm over his eyes when the lawyer begins reading the details of who can or cannot marry Tony, based upon a conflict of interest in Tony's care. The forbidden list includes the board of directors, several prominent senators, his mother's best friend, two family servants, and Obie. At this rate, Tony is only surprised that his dad hadn't banned their neighbor's elderly cocker spaniel.

A few of the banned people would be allowed to marry Tony under certain circumstances. For example, if Tony proved to lack appropriate self control and moral fiber (e.g., having children out of wedlock, arrested for drug use, having an abortion), and if Tony needed additional 'looking after', then the legal team of Hertz, Williams, and Tenner Jr could determine whether marriage to one of the aforementioned banned individuals might provide a 'stabilizing' influence on Tony, which would thereby override the conflict of interest. In which case, additional complex clauses would come into play as to the control of the Stark fortune, Stark Industries stock, real estate, etc.

The lawyer winds to the end of the document at last. The list of real estate properties that Tony will inherent--eventually--is twenty pages long. The stocks and bonds are in a whole separate stacks of manila folders.

The lawyers exchange looks when Tony holds out his hand to read them all.

At his side, Sa Honeycutt nods her approval. "It's good you're taking your responsibilities seriously, Tony. Always personally read everything a lawyer gives you." This seems to please the lawyers, because apparently they didn't understand that Sa Honeycutt just called them shifty assholes. They wait patiently for Tony to read everything.

Eventually, Tony signs his copy of the will and assorted documents. His ass, which his parents had controlled, now is controlled by Obie. Tony's more numb than scared, but maybe everyone feels this way. There's only so many hours in a day to feel anything.

Obie sends Tony back to school with Sa Honeycutt and the bodyguards. Tony gets the feeling that he's in the way. Each time he'd tried to talk to Obie about designs or specs or research, Obie had slung an arm around his shoulders and told him stories about dad's greatness. Tony eventually takes the hint. He's not dad. He never will be.

Chapter 8

Three months later, Tony is summoned to New York to visit Obie. The school sends him with another chaperone (this time a teaching assistant) and two more bodyguards.

Obie sits Tony down in a plush sitting room in a big office complex. When Obie explains how Stark Industry is on the verge of bankruptcy, Tony is incredulous. "No fucking way!"

But, apparently, yes way. Obie is surprisingly patient at explaining. Stark depended on Howard's amazing brain. It was a key-man company, and that man is dead. Contracts have been pulled from the company, their bids for new contracts aren't being accepted, and their credit isn't accepted as good for shipments of materials.

Tony frowns at the spreadsheets that Obie is showing him. "It says that we're OK, though. Look at this payment due in July. It will cover everything."

"That, my boy," Obie says, chomping his cigar, "is why you're here."

Tony turns his frown to Obie instead of the spreadsheet. "Me?"

"You. This is the Department of Defense contract for the new weaponry we're delivering in May. Your dad and I negotiated the contract last fall, but it was only signed a month before he died. The Appropriations Committee is considering doing a special motion to give the bid to Grammercy Industrial."

"Can they do that if the contract's been signed?" Tony is feeling queasy. The contract has a lot of zeroes.

"Legally?" Obie tilts his hand left and right. "Hard to say. Won't matter, though, because if they do it, SI is done. We've already built most of the tech. We can't sell it to anyone else because it's proprietary, and it's too expensive to scrap."

Tony swallows hard.

"I'm looking for a way around this, but we don't have a lot of good options." Obie sighs, and Tony can see the dark circles under his eyes. Tony has an odd urge to comfort him. Make things better. Obie isn't really family, but he feels like family.

"We're a team, Tony," Obie says. He must see something of what Tony is thinking. "If you help us out here, we'll be able to pull SI back from the brink. Do what your dad wanted."

Tony already knows that whatever it is, he won't like it. "A lot of people work at Stark, don't they?"

"A lot," Obie agrees. "Researchers, scientists, engineers, smart people. But also normal everyday people. Factory workers. It's hard labor, sometimes, welding and machining our tech, but they come in every day because what we do is important."

Tony nods. Stark Industry tech is important. He believes that. SI keeps America safe.

"I've got a way to sway the Appropriations Committee, but I need your help."

Tony has a sudden very bad feeling about this. Obie looks uncomfortable, like he's embarrassed. He keeps rolling his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. It's a sure tell.

"Senator Fromm is the Chair. He's interested."

"Interested," Tony repeats. Then he gets it. "*Oh.*"

Obie just nods. "I'd set it up so you were safe. I won't send you into this unless I can do that. But I need to know something before I do."

Later, Tony remembers that he expected Obie to ask him if he was willing to fuck a senator. If Tony had any ideas about maintaining his safety. If Tony could think of any other way out of this mess. If Tony's ready.

"Have you ever done it before?" Obie asks, eyes on Tony's face. "With *anyone*, Tony? No bullshit, serious answer, kiddo."

Tony feels the stupid idiot blush stain his cheeks. "What do you mean have I done it? I'm a Stark, we were born doing it."

Obie glares at him. "I mean it, Tony. We can do anything if we're together, but you need to be straight with me."

"No," Tony mutters, ashamed. He looks away, down at the carpet. "We don't even have alphas at school."

It's a lie, of course. Tony *has* done it before. He lost his virginity with Alex behind the soccer shed. Tony knows that doesn't count. Two omegas sipping stolen beer and necking and then having a fumbling and hilarious fuck on spring-green grass does not count as sex. No matter how many orgasms they'd managed in the name of science. Omegas can't really fuck other omegas. They can just fool around.

"Good." Obie seems pleased. He wraps an arm around Tony's neck and gives him a hug. "Good boy, Tony."

No one at school think virginity is anything but dangerously stupid, but Tony feels a rush of pleasure at Obie's praise. "Yeah, well."

"I'll set things up with the senator. You don't need to worry about being anything special for him. He saw you at the funeral and took a shine to you. Not sure why."

The flush of praise sinks. Tony feels a cold shiver. It seems kind of....creepy.

"He's real interested in being the first, so I need you to keep on being good. Do you understand, Tony?"

Tony understands. He may be an omega, but he's still smart. "I get it."

"Good." Obie's done with him. He's polite, but Tony gets the message loud and clear. While Obie is arranging a meeting with the senator for tomorrow, Tony mooches around Obie's office. He steals some discs and blueprints, which he stuffs into his schoolbag while pretending to do homework.

*

Unfortunately, the discs are just more (depressing) reports on SI's tricky financial status, including some confidential memos Tony has to hack the security to read. At least Obie isn't lying.

The blueprints are for a cigar holder to keep the damn things pure. Tony stuffs it in the trash, frustrated.

The next day he hauls it out again. It's the only blueprint of his father's designs that he owns.

*

It takes Obie less than two days to arrange the marriage contract. Tony signs his half in the Headmaster's office.

The senator has arranged for Tony to visit him in upstate New York, just a day before Tony's heat is due.

His omega studies teacher gives him an unabridged and adult version of Our Omega Bodies. There are several chapters on marriage, consummation, alpha mating behavior, and contraception.

Tony reads it all, but he wonders what good it will do. If he's stuck in a bedroom, in heat, with an ugly senator, will he be able to get hard? What if the senator wants a blowjob? There's a lot riding on his sordid little fling. Over three thousand Stark Industry jobs, for one thing.

A couple days before Tony's due to leave, his omega studies teacher shows up at his room again, to speak him privately. She has two more books and a xeroxed article.

The first book is about finding your sexual pleasure as an omega. Tony reads it, wondering if Alex would like to try some of this out sometime.

The photocopied article is about alpha attempts to create a bond and how to prevent it, if you want. There are no sure ways to prevent it, Tony discovers, but it helps if you avoid getting bitten repeatedly on the neck or orgasming while being bitten on the neck, or avoid having bodily fluids left inside you for too long while being bitten. (Maybe the article writer has a neck fetish?) The contract marriage to the senator stipulated no bonding, with enough vicious penalties to prevent that. (According to the gossip mill, the penalties are mostly added by the school's team of lawyers, which Tony finds kind of interesting.)

The last book is a lot darker than anything Tony's ever read. It's about grooming techniques that alphas use to program omegas to respond their personal sexual preferences, willingly or unwillingly. It's extensively and depressingly documented by scientific evidence.

Halfway through, Tony has to go into the bathroom to throw up.

He finishes the book, looks up some of the references, reads it again. Wonders how accurate it really is.

It turns out to be: very accurate.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> While I am not normally planning to warn for this series (assume all chapters could contain non/dub-con, disturbing themes, etc), I believe this chapter warrants a note. Except for a slap, there is no violence. However, this is a chapter depicting torture, pure and simple. It may not appear that way if you're not familiar with methods some torturers use, but it is, indeed, torture.
>
> Read with caution, please. I have specifically divided the chapters so that this one can be skipped. You should be able to deduce enough of what happens.

Senator Evan Fromm is just what Tony expects: White, only a little overweight, perfectly groomed down his manicured nails. He smells like he's been in a fight, even though Tony smells no sweat on him. Must be a metaphorical fight.

The senator's house is less modern than Howard's homes but similarly lavish. More old world furniture, big couches, fancy rugs, lots of curly woodwork and landscape paintings.

Tony isn't impressed, because he's lived with this stuff all his life, either at school or home. The senator shows Tony to his room, but of course, it's actually the senator's room. Tony has a place in the walk-in closet to set his suitcase. There must be a hundred suits in here, and they're all boring.

When Tony is getting ready to leave the closet (he doesn't actually unpack because why would he?), the senator steps way into Tony's personal space and clamps a hand on the back of Tony's neck.

Tony wants to pull away, but his body goes oddly still. It's weird.

The senator is smiling. "You were an absolute brat at your parents' funeral."

Tony feels a chill settle into his stomach. He is so so screwed.

The hand tightens on his neck. The senator is close, and Tony can smell the alpha pheromones begin to swirl in this tight space. The Senator's smell is high and sharp, like ozone, but there are other fight-smells. Tony can't tell them apart, but they're arousing.

"Is this your first time?" the senator asks, almost kind.

Tony wants to shake his head, wants to get out of here, but he never was good at keeping his mouth shut. "I screwed around with all my friends back at omega school. What do you think?" Asshole.

The hand pulls Tony's hair back until his throat is bared. It's done so fast that Tony gasps. "Don't get smart with me. Answer the question."

"I did! It's not my fault if you don't like the answer."

"Have you fucked an alpha?"

"No." Tony's eyes are watering.

"A beta?"

"No!"

The hand jerks his head back until he's off balance, then let's go. Tony's rocks forward, nearly falling, ready to run, but the senator is in front of him, suddenly, blocking the door. "Good. That's very good, Tony."

It's not good. Tony meant to lie--make up something about Alex being a beta, but he'd been too....something.

"I can smell your response, Tony. You're getting ready for me."

This is really, really bad. "I think," Tony says carefully, "I'd kind of like a tour of the house first. Before you fuck me or whatever."

The senator laughs and ruffles his hair. "I think we can manage that. But first, you need to get rid of these clothes."

Tony really doesn't want to. At all. But it's traditional for an omega to remove their clothes when they enter an alpha's home to mate. Alphas don't like their omegas to smell like anyone else. Tony's hands fumble on his shoe laces, and it takes forever to undo the button flys on his jeans. He gets naked, and the senator just watches.

"You're very pretty," the senator says, which is ridiculous. Tony knows he's hot, but he's not as elegant as Ian, say. Or feminine as Dylan.

The senator takes a thick leather collar from his suit. Tony backs up a step, until his back is pressed against a lot of silk suits. They all smell like the senator, and the smell fills his nostrils until they flare. Unbelievably, he can feel his cock twitch. What the hell.

The senator smiles. "That was very good, Tony. You took reassurance from me. I'm right here." He puts the collar on, and it's heavier than it looks.

The senator has a leash, too. "It's OK, Tony. I'm just going to show you my house, then I'll let you rest in the bedroom for a while."

Tony can hear the sincerity, and he does need to know the layout. If he wants to leave....best know the exits.

The house is boring. Surprisingly boring. Except for the occasional staffer who carefully looks anywhere but at the buck naked omega being paraded around by their boss. Tony can't help looking at everyone's not-shocked careful expressions. The senator must notice, too, but he doesn't say anything.

By the time Tony's done flashing everyone, he's feeling weird. Weirder. Warm and kind of sluggish.

When the senator leads him to the giant four poster, Tony climbs on it without argument. He's exhausted.

"You need to sleep." The senator has a sleep mask in his hand--well, kind of a sleep mask. It's more like soft-looking dark goggles. The light in the room is warm and gold, still daylight, but Tony's *tired*. He's not due to heat for another day, but sometimes early heat is like this.

The senator puts the sleep mask on Tony's face. "Comfortable, darling?"

Tony doesn't like being called darling, but he's just so tired. "Yeah, it's OK."

There's a soft click of the leash being unclipped. Good, Tony thinks. Then he hears another click. Senator changed his mind, Tony guesses.

Everything is stranger in the dark, but Tony's sense of smell is suddenly sharper. The senator is like a loud sharp high note. Tony leans in to smell, and he hears the senator chuckle. "Very nice. You're coming along. Just one more thing."

"Mmm?"

"A little treat. Open your mouth."

Tony is deeply, deeply suspicious, but he does--a tiny tiny bit. He feels the senator's thick fingers, then something smooth and dry that begins to melt. Chocolate. Dark, rich, chocolate. Tony lets it melt on his tongue, enjoying it. Maybe this won't be so bad.

When the senator guides him down, Tony goes. He's curled up in the senator's bed, and it's not too bad so far.

Looking back, years later, Tony knows he never had a chance.

*

Each little step is taken carefully.

The eyemask begins the senator's gentle introduction of sensory deprivation. The bed with its luxurious sheets and thick warm comforter reeks of the senator's body and his spent seed.

When Tony wakes up, he jerks awake, but the leash is tight. He can't go far and he falls back down. He's frightened, and the heat is building a bit. His balls feel taut the way they do the day before. Full.

He can't see anything. Tony remembers that he has the mask on, but when he tries to lift his hands, they're caught on a leash around his waist. Tony tries to scramble up, but he's bound too much.

"Hush, you're fine." That hand rests against the back of his neck. Tony stills out of reflex, and a small chocolate is pressed into his mouth. Tony's "oh" of surprise allows the senator to slip it inside.

Tony calms a little, and the hand leaves his neck. "There, you were very very good."

"What happened?"

"I had a phone call." The voice is casual, offhand. "I'm sorry I had to step away. Did you have a nice nap?"

"I'm tied. My hands."

"And you look lovely." Another chocolate at his mouth. Tony's body is starving, and he opens to eat it before he can stop. The senator strokes his throat as he swallows. "I like the way your cock is getting flushed."

"I--don't know what--"

"Shhh. You don't have to know. Eat."

That's all that happens for a while. The senator feeds him small bites of chocolate and pets him. It's not so bad. Tony's starving. The senator switches to small bites of other food, and, when Tony accidentally licks his fingers, the senator gives him a sip of whiskey as a reward. It burns a fiery path down his throat and loosens something.

When Tony is just feeling comfortable, if confused, the senator offers him a drink of water. Tony obeys, drinking more than he really wants because the senator insists. Tony is getting tired again.

At last, the senator stops. Without any words, Tony can only smell him and hear his breathing.

"I have a short meeting, but it's confidential. I'd like to stay close to you, but you mustn't hear."

"OK." Tony's not averse to the senator leaving for a little while, so long as he takes off the mask so Tony can see again.

"I know this is going to be hard for you, but I'm going to put in some ear plugs. Only for a little while. But you'll be fine. Won't you?"

Tony doesn't want to, but he knows what these senators are like about confidentiality. "I guess. Not long, though, right?"

"Not long," the senator agrees.

It's much worse than Tony imagined it would be. The senator is gentle, but now Tony has only smell and touch to go on. The world is very dark and very quiet. The senator's smell fades as he leaves.

He seems to be gone a very very long time. Eventually, Tony is shivering. He's cold and he's confused. A touch to his shoulder makes him cry out, but the hands help him up, water is pressed to his lips. He drinks thirstily, letting the hands roam over him wherever while he sucks greedily at the water.

When it's all gone, he tries to hold onto the wrist. He's rewarded with more chocolate and another sip of whiskey, strokes and pets, and then it all vanishes again.

Tony doesn't know how long he spends shivering in the dark, alone, afraid.

He smells the senator before he sees him. It's such a relief that Tony tries to get closer. There's touch on his body, all over, from his hair to his back down over the wrist restraints, to his cock. He flinches at that, tries to get away, but when the senator stops, Tony's afraid, so he tries to move back into the touch. The senator's large hand on his cock is uncomfortable, but Tony doesn't stop the frank exploration this time. The senator can have that as long as he doesn't leave.

Tony's not aroused, but things are getting....immanent. He blurts out that he has to pee. There's a gentle touch on his head, and one of the ear plugs is removed. "I'm going to help you."

Tony is led carefully, still blind, by the collar and by the hand on the small of his back. The floor is suddenly cool tile and the smell is that of a bathroom. Soap. Clean.

The senator has to help him because of the blindfold. It's horrible and humiliating, but the senator keeps telling him how good he's being and Tony is about ready to do anything the senator wants if he just won't leave again.

The senator has patted him dry and Tony can feel he's being led back to bed. The senator offers him more chocolates, praising him quietly. The chocolates make him thirsty, and he doesn't want to drink the warm water, but he does it because his throat is so dry. The senator doesn't say anything before putting the ear plugs back in. Then he's gone for what feels like forever.

When he's back, Tony is desperate. As soon as the senator touches him, Tony pleads, burying his face against whatever of the senator he can reach. "I'll do it. I'll be good. Whatever you want."

He can't hear himself speak, which is horrible.

He's rewarded by the senator taking out one ear plug. "You can, Tony. You can do anything I tell you to do."

The words are so loud in the darkness. Tony can smell everything in sharp relief and the senator's voice is like flashing neon. The senator smells exactly like the sharp lime cologne

Tony smelled at Bloomingdale's on a shopping field trip. It's the same smell that's on the sheets of the bed, the ones that Tony curled under for comfort and safety in the dark.

Tony hasn't moved away, and the senator must think that's OK, because he's stroking Tony's hair now. It feels so good. It shouldn't, Tony knows that, but it does.

When the senator strokes his neck, Tony flinches. "You can do anything I tell you, Tony, can't you?"

Tony nods, shaken. If his flinch made the senator unhappy, he won't flinch again. Not ever.

The senator strokes his neck, and this time, Tony holds very still. It doesn't feel good the way the hair petting does. It makes his stomach churn and his lower belly feels....off. The senator keeps doing it, his voice warm in the cold dark.

After a while, the senator pulls on Tony's collar and arranges him on his side. His big hands caress every part of Tony, telling him how pretty he is. Tony knows he's not pretty--he's a guy. But the words feel good anyway, and it doesn't hurt anything to just lie here and let the senator do what he wants. When the senator gets to his cock, Tony's half-hard. It's embarrassing.

The senator tells him that he'll do better next time. Tony feels the blush on his neck. "I'm sorry--I didn't mean to. It's just, fucking biology, right?"

The senator laughs. "It is exactly fucking biology. You'll learn to be nice and hard for me soon enough, sweetheart. Don't worry. This is just your first time."

Oh. The senator wanted him hard. Well, he's there now. It's weird and creepy and Tony really isn't actually all that into it, but his body sure seems to be. When the senator leans down, Tony is totally unprepared for getting a nose-full of the senator's neck.

It's like his body flipped a switch.

Tony *moans*. It's the hottest thing he's ever felt in his life. Hotter than the porn Sarah smuggled in last Christmas. Hotter than sex with Alex. Hotter than his last heat in the damn private room with the school's amazing dildo collection.

Without any input from his brain, Tony's spread his legs and he's leaned up to bury his nose in the senator's neck. He wants more of that.

The senator is laughing softly, petting his cock, and Tony's about ready to come.

"Yes, god, please, please," Tony is saying.

"Not quite yet, darling," the senator says, withdrawing his hand.

Tony grabs him with the hand that can reach. "I am dying here. Don't you fucking leave again. I can't take it."

The senator's slap isn't hard, but Tony couldn't see it coming. "You can take anything I give you, darling. You'll take it and love it and be begging for more."

Tony's lip is bleeding. He can taste the blood. It doesn't seem to matter, because his body is on some kind of autopilot of its own. He spreads his legs further apart. "Don't you want me?"

"Tease," the senator says fondly. "I knew you'd be a slut."

The words hurt, because Tony's a virgin, but it's just dirty talk. All alphas say this stuff. It's OK, and it doesn't mean anything. But Tony is really getting desperate. He tries to reach his own cock, but the wrist restraints are too short.

"What do you need, darling?" the senator asks. Bastard.

"You. Come on, fuck me, will you?"

"I should leave you like this just to teach you a lesson."

Tony goes completely still, because the dark is awful.

"But I won't. Not if you're good. What are you, Tony?"

"I--" Tony senses the trap, but he's smart. Smarter than some asshole senator. "I'm whatever you want me to be. Sir."

"Very good." That gets him a long gentle stroke to his aching cock.

The senator likes to play word games, because they end up playing them for a while. At one point, Tony has to choose between eating and getting fucked, and it's a lot harder to decide than it should be. He buries his face into the pillow and whines while the senator's big hand strokes down his back. That's a lot more comforting than it should be.

When Tony finally admits that he wants to be fucked more than he wants food, the senator finally begins touching him again. There are no more touches to Tony's cock--that's forbidden, because the senator isn't gay. All the touches are to Tony's increasingly wet opening, and it all feels so good. The heat is barely starting, but Tony's already feeling desperate and nearly drunk with it.

The senator's fingers are large, and he plays with Tony, teasing him.

Tony's body is responsive and ready. In no time, he's fucking back into the senator's fingers, babbling about how much he wishes it were the senator's fat alpha cock. He's so ready, so needy, he's whatever the senator wants.

Suddenly, the senator withdraws his fingers. He smears the dampness on Tony's mouth, which should be gross, but isn't.

Then he's standing up, putting Tony's earplug back in, and *leaving*.

That's when Tony loses it completely.

No amount of pleading, begging, or promises to be better work. The senator is long gone. Tony screams until he's hoarse, but no one comes. Finally, exhausted, he cries himself to sleep.

Tony loses all track of time. When the senator comes back, he doesn't take out the ear plugs for a long time. He just moves Tony's body this way and that, and Tony lets him, shivering.

Finally, the senator has Tony's arms spread-eagled above his head, each wrist tied, and Tony on his belly, knees to each side and legs spread. Tony can feel his body's wetness trickling out. Tony can't see himself, but he knows he's bent over, spread, ready, his opening available. His heat is heady, and all Tony can think about is how good his alpha smells.

The senator takes out one ear plug, then the other. Tony didn't even know he was making needy noises, gasps and moans and little whines, but he is. He ties to stop, but he can't.

The senator is stroking his face and hair, and Tony has never felt anything so good in his life. He hears himself saying it, but it's like his mouth has no filter at all anymore.

"That's it, darling, you're being very good."

Tony moans in pleasure and tells the senator how desperate he is to please.

"Do you know what you did wrong, darling?"

Tony has no idea and says so. He promises to never ever do it again, if only his alpha will stay. He's sorry, very sorry.

"Shhh. It's your first time, and you're still learning. It was my fault, really. I shouldn't have expected you to be any good."

Tony tells the senator that no, it's his own fault, but he'll be so much better now. He wants to be better.

"I know you do." The senator rewards him by sliding his fingers through the wetness at Tony's opening. Tony bites the pillows and tries not to buck back into it. He's pretty sure he wasn't supposed to.

"You're a slut, darling, and that's OK. That's what you were born to be. To be a sexual plaything for your alpha. It's your destiny."

Tony moans, because the senator slides his finger deep inside at slut, born to be, sexual plaything, and destiny. It feels better than anything.

"But you forgot your main purpose, darling."

"To be whatever you want me to be, sir?"

The senator laughs again, but it's not cruel, just fond. He shoves a whole finger inside Tony and crooks it just so. Tony bucks in his bonds, whole body spasming in pleasure as wetness trickles out of him. "Very good answer. But more specifically, you're designed to pleasure your alpha. Your alpha's pleasure always comes first, darling. What do you say now?"

Tony says he's sorry and then he begs the senator to let him please him, try again, anything.

"I will, but because you were so bad before, I'm going to have to show you how important an alpha is. Your alpha is whole world, darling."

Tony doesn't struggle when the senator puts the other earplug back in. He doesn't move when the senator puts on more ties to his wrist and neck. He lets the senator tie his thighs to something so that his legs are held open. It's uncomfortable, but Tony is well past caring. He's in some kind of drowsy state of desperation and sexual frustration. If the senator doesn't fuck him, he's kind of afraid he might die.

The senator touches his cock again, but Tony doesn't move. Even in the dark, he can feel the soft leather. The senator slips something over the head of Tony's cock and works an icy cold plug the size of Antarctica into the hole at the tip. Then the senator is tying leather straps around his balls, tugging on them, and then more leather around the base. When he's done, Tony's head is hanging down, sweat at his temples. He feels completely tied down, and he knows he won't be able to come from his cock. It's his punishment.

The senator lets him get used to it for a bit, or maybe it's supposed to be a time to think about what he did wrong. Tony doesn't know. He just knows his hole is getting wetter. He can feel dampness trickle out of himself.

At last, the senator moves around again. The movement of the bed is the only sense Tony really has left. Without touch, Tony is lost.

Then there's something at his mouth. It's not skin and it's not leather, but it's something. Tony can smell the senator's hand, so he opens his mouth, takes the gag. He's sucking on it even as the senator is pushing it in. It's a lot bigger than the ones Tony saw on Sarah's porno, or maybe it just feels big. It fills his mouth and keeps his jaw strained, and the senator ties it around his head, petting him with his other hand.

Tony's totally bound, now, every limb, every sense, reduced down.

The senator moves off the bed, leaving, and Tony struggles. He tries to scream, but it's muffled. His attempts to pull against his restraints are utterly useless. He was supposed to be good, and he is good, he is.

Then mercifully, the bed dips. Tony feels it.

There's no soothing touch, but Tony knows because it's because it's his own fault. His head is hanging down, and he's panting from the effort of keeping still.

Time hangs there.

Then, Tony feels it. A shift in weight on the bed. A warmth at his entrance. The blunt tip shoving forward, slowly filling him.

It's like sunlight in the darkness.

Tony's cries aren't screams of fear anymore, but moans of pleasure. He holds as still as he can while the senator shoves inside him. He's tight and the senator is big, but he's very wet. The senator fucks him harder than Alex ever had. Short brutal thrusts than hit something deep inside him.

The fucking becomes Tony's whole world. All his other senses are drowned out by it, and he can do nothing but take it.

It doesn't last as long as Tony wants, but he tells himself that's OK. The senator shoves all the way in, and Tony can feel the way his cock hardens. He can feel the sudden wetness. And when the senator pulls out, still coming, to jet on Tony's damp hole, it feels.....right.

His alpha has used him for his own pleasure, and it's OK that Tony didn't come. It's right. He's been fucked and marked and now everyone will be able to tell that he belongs to his alpha.

The senator moves off the bed, but Tony's so exhausted, he's less afraid. In only a moment, the senator is at Tony's head. Tony feels soft damp skin rubbing at his mouth and cheeks, against his neck, and he doesn't move. The senator is scent marking him here, too.

At last, the senator seems satisfied. He takes out Tony's ear plugs and pulls out the heavy gag. "You did very well, darling. What's your purpose?"

"Pleasing you." The words come easy, but Tony's voice is hoarse.

"Very good, darling. Would you like a treat?"

"Yes."

The senator gets up. Tony hears him open something with a plastic lid, then a cold wet touch against his hole, where the senator had fucked him. Something is sliding inside. It's big, as big as the senator, and when it's seated, Tony moans at the full feeling.

"I have a meeting now, darling, but I won't leave you alone again. I'll always leave you with a little token of myself."

Then the senator does something to the base of the dildo and it roars into vibrating life. Tony's head droops down and he moans in pleasure. The senator laughs, rocking it in and out, playing around.

"You look perfect like this. Bred for pleasuring an alpha."

The senator moves the toy around, changing speeds and direction, until he finds a place that makes Tony gasp and writhe. He keeps it there, laughing softly at Tony's reaction. Tony

feels the humiliation in his stomach, but he can't stop himself from squeezing down on the intruder inside, bucking into the fierce pleasure.

"You can come now," the senator says lazily.

Tony feels his body release, because it's critical, but he's crying too. It's horrible and humiliating, but the senator is kissing the tears from his face and telling him how beautiful he is like this. The relief of coming is tremendous.

When Tony's all done, the senator tells turns the dildo off and says, "I have to take care of you, Tony. You're not your own anymore, you're an extension of me. You're here to please me, and anything I ask you to do, you can do. Can't you?"

Tony's face is wet. "I guess so."

"It felt good to do what I said," the senator says calmly. "You don't have to say, but I know it did. That's because you need to give in. I know you didn't like it, but you needed to understand that I have control over your body. If you do what I say, you'll feel so good. Better than anything."

The senator's hands move from Tony's ass downwards, seeking again, and Tony discovers that he's wet all the way down his thighs. It's worse than anything before. He does not like this. He doesn't. But his squirms to get away don't upset the senator, he just laughs. "You're still having a hard time, Tony. That's OK. It's just your first time pleasing your alpha, and part of the fun is showing you how few limits you omegas really have. You got wet because you pleased me."

Tony is shaking. He gets wet because of heat. He read about it, in class, but maybe--

"Let me show you." The senator tugs up on the leash and Tony raises his head. "Good! See, you're doing very well. You just don't believe in yourself. Someone told you that you weren't a good omega, Tony, but you are."

The shame and confusion are a roiling mess now, and when the senator slides his fingers behind Tony's balls to sample his wetness, Tony's sensitive skins shivers. It feels good. Not like when he and Alex fooled around, but better.

"You're responding, Tony. See?"

Tony rocks back into the touch.

"Good. I don't want to tire you out, though, little one. I'm going to leave you here with your treat, and I'll take my conference call. When I'm back, you can have a little nap while I work."

The gag is presented to his mouth. The senator doesn't even ask, just pushes it in, and ties it on. Tony's still shaky from the mind-numbing orgasm. The earplugs go back in, and Tony feels the senator leave the bed. He's all alone again. Alone in the dark.

Then he feels a brief touch between his legs. The senator has turned the dildo back on. It buzzes to life, stronger than before. Tony is already squirming to get away from the overload when the senator slaps his ass and Tony can smell that his scent is gone.

He buries his face in the pillows and comes.

Chapter 10

It's Sa Honeycutt who picks him up at the senator's brownstone when his heat is done. She makes polite chit chat with the senator's aide while the Academy bodyguards fetch his luggage.

Tony is completely unable to look anyone in the eyes. He's wearing an overlarge linen turtleneck in black, a gift from the senator, dark jeans, boots, and a new bracelet. He hasn't had a shower since he got here, and he knows he must reek of alpha-sex scent.

Asking for a shower had gotten him total silence and utter darkness for a very long time, so he hadn't asked again.

If Sa Honeycutt notices how badly her student smells, she is far too polite to say so.

It's the brightness and the loudness that Tony can't handle. Everyone keeps moving, and even the dimly lit hallway seems lit by a thousand watt bulb. He keeps flinching at nothing and then apologizing compulsively, unable to stop himself.

Sa Honeycutt does something to get rid of the aide.

Then she's touching Tony's elbow gently in that way she has. Inoffensive, non-threatening. Sa Honeycutt has the least alpha body language of anyone Tony has ever met. She's holding out a pair of sunglasses in her other hand. He puts them on. It helps.

They don't talk in the limo.

When they reach the private jet, Sa Honeycutt leaves the bodyguards in the front, then she shuts and locks the door. Tony paces away. No offense to her, but he'd rather not be near anyone.

Sa Honeycutt is taking out a small black plastic box, though, and Tony's still curious enough to sneak a look. Vials. Tiny plastic syringes. Sampling equipment.

"He didn't rape me," Tony says, because he's not stupid.

"It's not a rape kit." Sa Honeycutt takes out a vial and a swab covered in plastic wrap. "Let me swab your cheek."

"What the hell is it, then?"

"Drug test."

"Oh well, that's just great." Tony opens up wide and she swabs the inside of his cheek. "Nice of you guys to bust me for drinking champagne on my wedding night. Classy, even."

"Hush, you." She pops the swab in the plastic vial and gives it a good shake. The gel inside turns bright pink.

"What the hell is that?" Tony snatches the vial from her hand and reads the label, but it's only a specific test number.

"Pink means you were given Desiara mixed with alcohol."

Tony stares at her. "I never took any pills."

"I'm sure you didn't." The school warns them about that, but it's never that simple.

What was it in, Tony wonders. The chocolates? The water? The whiskey? Jesus, now he has no idea. He walks away to look out the window. He's icy cold even in the heavy sweater.

"I want a bath," he says. So damn badly.

"We need to run a few more tests," she says gently. "And I don't think you should be alone."

Tony nods vaguely. He probably shouldn't. Desiara is a strong disinhibitor. Alcohol increases the effects.

"Tony, look at me."

He turns. He still has the sunglasses on, so the plane interior is soft gray. His head aches, but he doesn't feel high the way he did yesterday. He feels more like he's a few steps outside himself. Distant. It's not so bad.

"If you want to wait for the shower until we get back to school, Na Anderson can help you."

"No," Tony says quickly. "I don't want her to know. Not this."

"Tony, most of us have had marriages like this. Na Anderson is going to understand."

"No!"

"OK." She sighs, picks up another vial, offers it. "This is for sexual fluids, I'm afraid. To test for Veritas."

Tony just starts taking off his clothes. Sa Honeycutt's expression doesn't change, but her eyes go sad for a moment. "Let's go to the bathroom. Then we can get you that shower."

Tony doesn't see that it matters where they do this, but maybe it's more hygienic in a bathroom.

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In the end, Sa Honeycutt's little black box detects three drugs in Tony's system. The Desirias, UnDone, and Serenax. Desirias, to reduce inhibitions. UnDone, an omega heat amplifier, generally considered the best street drug to turn your omega into a sex-crazed nympho. And Serenax, a prescription medication for omegas that calms anxiety.

The Serenax was administered only recently--that morning.

The rest have been in his system a long time, probably since he arrived at the senator's brownstone.

Technically, under the 1951 Marriage Act, only the Serenax is considered illegal. Since Tony keeps flinching anytime shadows move, and since the school nurse gives him a prescription for the damn stuff, he's not exactly interested in filing a complaint about the anti-anxiety medication.

The sexuality counselor that the school has him see is less creepy than Tony expects. He's taken more than his allotted pretty blue pills when he sees her. No, the senator never used force. Yes, Tony consented to everything. Hell, he tells her, he fucking loved it. How screwed up is that?

Not screwed up at all, the (obviously batshit insane) counselor tells him. "You've got a strong preservation instinct, Tony. That got you through. None of this is your fault."

"He bent me over the desk in his office while his aide was there! I came as soon as he got it in. How the hell does that make it not my fault? I *wanted it*--don't you get that?"

She says she gets it, but Tony doesn't go back. He invents a series of complicated excuses to get out of his next session. And the next.

It's Na Anderson who tracks him down. He's in a big oak on the south property, testing some sensory equipment he invented.

She tosses him a walkie talkie. He tosses it back.

The next thing she tosses up is a wadded up piece of paper. Unfolded, it reads:

If you don't talk to me, I'm going to blow up the tree. You know I mean it.

Grumbling, Tony climbs back down. He's wearing sunglasses--a different pair than the ones Sa Honeycutt gave him. Those are in his room in his keepsake box.

"Come into my parlor," Na Anderson says. She's laid out a ratty blanket on the grass. Tony sits.

"I don't want to talk about it," Tony says. "Really. It's over."

"I've been married five times," Na Anderson says. "The second marriage, my alpha used sensory deprivation techniques."

Tony shuts up, but he isn't any good at it. "I read the omega handbook before I did it. I could have fought it more."

"Not drugged to gills and in your first heat with a real alpha."

Tony grunts. He doesn't agree, but she's maybe got a point. A small point, obviously.

"I picked up a couple of very creepy kinks during that marriage, Mr Stark."

Tony stares at her. Did she just call him Mr Stark? She did.

"It didn't matter whether I consented to what happened or not, I had those preferences conditioned into me. They felt good. When it happened, and after. Do you think that makes me a bad person?"

"No, but it's not the same thing."

Na Anderson just shrugs. "You don't have to talk about it, Tony. You don't have to do anything about it, either. But enjoying what happened doesn't mean it controls you. Having kinky sex doesn't mean that submitting to an alpha will forever haunt your destiny."

"Did you just quote Star Wars in a sex talk?"

Na Anderson's eyes twinkle, which is kind of reassuring and kind of disturbing. "I think you should consider making your own future. One that you want. The present is just the present--there's only so much control any of us have in the now. But the future....maybe we can guide that a bit more."

Tony toys with a grass stem. "I don't want to get married again."

"I know."

Tony pulls apart the stem slowly. "I hate him. For doing that to me."

"I know."

Tony flops back on the grass. "I tried to have normal sex. A couple days ago. With Alex. I guess you know about that, huh?"

"No, contrary to popular student opinion, teachers aren't obsessed with student dating. What happened?"

"It was.....boring. I couldn't really get off."

"Yeah, that can happen."

"You're not very reassuring."

"I'm not much of a liar, Tony."

Tony watches the wind move the trees for a while. "I want to be an engineer. I always wanted to run Stark Industries. Build weapons. But I can't."

"How come?"

"DoD rules."

Na Anderson snorts. It's derisive. "Like the DoD actually cares what you've got in your pants, kid. It's all about plausible deniability. Get a beard."

Tony turns and stares at her. "A beard."

"You know, someone who can shill your designs, put their name on your patents. I use my son Brad."

"I didn't know you had a son."

"There's a lot I don't talk about, Tony. But he lives overseas, and he has some of the best patent lawyers in the universe. I have him take the credit, and I get my designs out in the world."

Tony looks at the sky. "You designed the welding torch we use in the shop." It's not a question.

"Yep." Na Anderson pokes him in the leg. "If you want to be an engineer, be one."

"Yeah," Tony says, watching the clouds, "Maybe. I guess."

*

The first problem in getting Tony's designs out into the world is money. Tony has access to a lot of cash, but it's in the form of a credit card, and Obie reviews each statement religiously. Six hundred dollar shoes are no problem, but sixty dollars' worth of tools can result in a worrying phone call.

What Tony needs is his own income stream.

*

Tony doesn't have the connections to hack Stark Industries servers while they're still running the protection system that his dad designed. Eventually, Obie will have to switch to a different protection system, and Tony can crack in, but for now... Tony will need to resort to corporate espionage if he wants to see SI weaponry blueprints. Which requires bribes, which requires cash, which brings him full circle again.

Fuck.

Not only does he need money, he needs lots and lots of money.

*

Tony reads through his dad's will, but there are no loopholes, unless Tony is willing to get married. He really really isn't.

Chapter 11

Tony tries selling some small manufacturing designs. Nothing too fancy. A microwave that's energy efficient. A toaster that auto-senses the bread/bagel ratio for optimum toasting. A small robot that washes and waxes vintage cars according the year make and model.

They sell under Tony's carefully forged alias of Edward Antonio Roanoke (ambitious but poverty stricken beta, graduate of MIT) but for a teeny tiny amount. A measly two hundred grand, even though the robot wins a Car and Driver award and cover shoot.

It's infuriating.

Tony's found a corporate spy at SI who is willing to bring him some weapons tech specs and blueprints, but only if Tony transfers a cold million via Swiss banks. It's kind of chilling, because Tony hasn't exactly made the dude think he was on the side of the angels.

*

While Tony tries to invent a multi-million dollar 'as seen on TV' gadget, he does homework and reads the papers. Stark Industries is in trouble. It's only a ripple right now. New products delayed by poor testing results. Some minor product recalls. But Tony can tell that without his dad's mind in the R&D department, SI is having quality control problems. SI has always charged a fortune for its products, and they've gotten away with it because they were so good. But if quality drops, they'll be fucked.

A few smaller, more specialized companies are making a bit of headway in the SI marketshare.

Tony throws his copy of the Economist in the trash and goes back to the workshop. Maybe the all-in-one hair dryer, curler, straightener will work out. Or the robotic lawnmower. They're good designs, effective, classy, practical, but they all require manufacturing at a high standard. Tony can't afford that.

*

When Alex pops by to ask Tony if he wants to play Ultimate Frisbee on the lawn, Tony has had enough.

He slumps out after his friend.

"You need a shave," Alex says. "Your beard looks like an alpha, dude."

Tony stops. "Holy shit."

Alex rolls his eyes. "You are such a vain creature. I swear nobody will care if your delicate locks lack that certain Stark je ne sais quoi."

"No, that's it. That's it. I look like an alpha, right?"

Alex stares at him. "Actually, you look like a crazy person. More like a homeless guy."

"Work with me here. Would you ever want to look like an alpha?"

"Nooooo," Alex says slowly. "Maybe a beta. But I'd rather just stay at school where it doesn't matter. If they catch you trying to pass off as a beta, you can go to prison. No way would I risk that."

"Good point. OK, OK, but what would you want?"

"Uh, I don't know." But Alex is used to Tony's ramblings. He's a good sport. "You know, I'd really love to give alphas an anti-drug. Shut their creepy down. Switch off their amazing cocks."

Tony kisses him on the mouth. "You're a fucking genius!" Then he dashes back down to the lab. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," Alex calls back, amused. "I'll have the cafeteria send you sandwiches later, OK?"

Tony just flaps a hand, still running down the steps to the shop.

*

Which is how Tony Stark makes his first million off an illegal street drug popularly named Fuck You.

It takes Tony almost three months to create Fuck You. He has to befriend the bio-chem fiend Tom from the year behind him, but that's OK. Tom's an all right guy.

Between Tony's manufacturing genius and Tom's bio-chemistry genius, they come up with the ideal synthetic compound that can be manufactured into bright purple pills. All the ingredients are absolutely omega-safe, if a teensy bit unusual and expensive. Tony's sure they can figure out a way to cut manufacturing cost once they get FDA approval. Investors will be knocking down their door once the rumor mill starts to grind.

After Tony tests the drug on himself to make sure it's safe (it is), they spread it out to various volunteers for an informal focus group. They've got their school friends giving out samples of the drug to omegas who can fuck on the outside, and so far the results are fan-fucking-tastic as Alex puts it.

If an omega takes Fuck You during or right before heat, the omega's body processes it extra-quickly. For the omega, nothing actually happens.

It's just that an omega on Fuck You has a little bitty surprise inside for any alpha dumb enough to take advantage.

Omegas who are sane tend to reject most alpha advances, as everyone knows. Hence the prevalence of Desirea laced-chocolates, as Tony can personally attest. So lots of alpha hit on an omega in heat, often setting things up so the alpha can take advantage of the heat-addled omega against their will.

Alphas believe they can fuck an omega into enjoying themselves. Hormones, drug-laced chocolates, or just plain orgasmic lethargy should overcome any omega's resistance once the deed is done, or the cock's in place.

There's no reason for an alpha not to try the 'fuck your way to your omega's heart' routine. Until now.

Fuck You is a sneaky bastard of a drug. An omega on Fuck You looks just like an omega who isn't on it. There's no discernible smell, taste, or touch that's different.

But once an alpha gets inside, things change. Omega bodies are powerful little chemistry sets. The omega's body transmutes Fuck You into a whole new chemical--a chemical that is a powerful alpha antagonist.

And that antagonist is skin-permeable--secreted in large quantities in omega saliva and sexual fluids.

"It was great," Sherry tells Tony, who is the one typing up results today. Her eyes are shining with a manic glow as Tony enters data. "I told Cliff I had a headache, because I did, but he said, well you know how they get."

Tony nods. He knows.

"So he's got my skirt off and my panties down. I'm trying to whack him on the head, but he gets his willy in me, and then wham!" Sherry slams her hand on the lab desk so hard the coffee mugs jump.

"He explodes?" Tony asks hopefully, because you never know your luck.

"I wish. But it was almost that good." Her eyes go kind of dreamy. "He made this horrible hacking sound and pulled out. Then he threw up all over my feet. Huuuuuge mess. His mom had to take him to the ER."

Tony perks up. "What did they diagnose him with?"

"Food poisoning. They pumped his stomach." She laughs evilly. "When his mom came in, his pants were still down, and he was writhing in agony."

Tony types in 'writhing agony' as an eight on the 'desired results' scale. "So would you purchase this medication if you had a chance?"

"Are you kidding?" She leans forward. "I would buy it for all my friends. Any chance you have more?"

Tony gives her a small stack of samples. She crows in delight and sticks them in purse.

"Now, how about you? Any side effects? Dry mouth, headache, nausea?"

"I got a little queasy when Cliff was barfing everywhere, but I think that's just because he was so gross. I was a lot more myself, too. Not so--you know."

Overcome by post-orgasm alpha pheromones. "Yep, I know." Tony types some more. "On a scale of one to ten, one being not interested in sex at all and ten being I wanna fuck that lamp-post, where would you say you were in your heat cycle?"

Sherry thinks about it. "Maybe a four. I kind of thought it might be nice, if it was the right person. Someone attractive, kind. After dinner and a movie. Lights on, soft music. Not on the dirty carpet at Cliff's mom's apartment for god's sake."

Tony marks down four on the 'heat phase' chart. "This is a big help, Sherry. We appreciate it."

"When are you going to market this? Can we buy it at the drugstore yet?"

"We're having some trouble getting FDA approval."

"Bastard government."

"You're telling me."

*

It takes Tony only a couple weeks to figure out that the FDA is not going to approve their drug--*ever*.

Fucking hell.

*

Upper classmen go on heavily supervised field-trips. It's important for young omegas of good families to know how to interact with society.

Tony's at some ritzy gala, wearing a penguin suit, and trying to hide from various Republican senatorial cronies of Fromm's. Getting hit on by the senator's dear friend from the great state of New Jersey was more than enough fun for one evening.

It's too bad he's too big to fit under the tables. He always got the best gossip that way.

As he's schmoozing his way to the most likely exit, he runs across a lovely young redhead. She's wearing a demure blue dress that sets off her pale skin, and she's directing drunk politicians with ease.

Tony wrangles an introduction. "Miss Potts," she says, looking down her nose at him.

"Tony Stark." He flashes her his very best charming smile. "I'd love to poach you."

*

It takes a while for Tony to convince the divine Miss Potts to become his personal assistant. She has a worrying degree of morals when it comes to things like untested illegal drug usage, but he's sure he'll win her over eventually. Besides, she's far too good to work in Washington for a jerk like Herzog.

After much hard work on Tony's part, including a dedicated shoe allowance of two pairs a week in addition to stock options to their newly formed illicit company, Pepper consents, grudgingly, to assist Tony in getting Fuck You to the general public.

Somewhat to Pepper's disgust, their first run of pills sells out in a day and a half. Their dealers, carefully background checked to their back teeth, keep calling for refills.

Then Tony finds out that Pepper had upped the price per pill to one hundred dollars even. Tony had planned on forty per pill, just to test the market.

Pepper just rolls over all of them. "The manufacturing costs are too high. We needed to make an initial profit and test our customer base for price points. This markup positions us to negotiate with a better manufacturer than some cousin in a basement in Philly." Her lip curls. Pepper hates the guy in Philly.

"If only we could have a real drug lab," Tom says. He's been making variants on Fuck You to sell separately or as a package.

"I'm interviewing potential candidates Tuesday," Pepper says. Tony tells her she's a gem, and she just rolls her eyes.

*

Two years later, they're all ridiculously, if secretly, wealthy. Tony's bought blueprints and samples for Stark Industry's most troubled weapons systems, and he's made engineering fixes to them all. After a long debate with Pepper, he'd sent the upgrades to Obadiah. ("He is your *official legal guardian*, Tony. And he is the CEO. Don't you think he ought to know?")

It turns out that Obie does want to know. In fact, Obie's kind of over the moon about it, and he tells Tony that they're going to make a great team. Tony can work on the plans on the sly, and once the products improve, Obie'll slowly get the word out to the higher ups about who's making all these design upgrades. Gradually, so it doesn't frighten the board.

Part of Obie's plan is for Tony to begin taking over a few of the marketing and glad-handing parts of SI leadership. Attend charity balls as Stark Industry's representative. Give awards. Show off their pro-bono medical advances to hospitals and university med centers. Be 'the human side' of Stark Industries. That's a role an omega can comfortably fill, since everyone knows that omegas are charming care-givers. Tony's mom used to do this stuff, back in the day.

Tony's surprisingly good at it, even if it does make it hard for him to get all of his homework done.

Rules for omega education are different than for other types. Betas and alphas reach legal majority at eighteen, but for omegas, legal majority doesn't happen until twenty-one. Miss Price students can finish their formal education as early as sixteen, but usually stay at the school until they're twenty one.

Some students have responsibilities that pick up once they hit eighteen or twenty, so Miss Price allows older omega students to leave campus to attend overnight functions, if suitably chaperoned. Tony isn't thrilled with being followed literally everywhere by two bodyguards and a teaching assistant, but it does seem to make it more difficult for random alphas to hit on him at the SI parties.

Tony sometimes has to stay overnight at hotels, and he understands the dangers of rogue alphas better now. It's not that he misses school, *exactly*, but it's not as much fun to explore these cities without his friends. He wishes he could drag Alex to check out the old WPA built courthouse in Iowa City. There's a refinery in Duluth that Na Anderson would love. In Chicago, he sees tickets for a performance of an acrobatics troupe that Melody would enjoy. In San Francisco, Tony buys a painting and has it shipped to Pepper. The various chaperones and guards are very nice about going to gelato shops, car dealerships (even if Tony is too young to drive, still), toy stores, and specialized warehouses that sell complex mechanical engineering tools.

Tony tries a little of everything and tries not to wish he had someone special to share it with.

But overall, things are good.

*

Actually, things are practically perfect. Tony is in year three of his five-year plan to get Stark Industries and his life back on track. He's done amazing things for Stark, school's still going great, and his latest paper on heat-stress alloy testing has been accepted to the New England Journal of Engineering.

Tony's twenty years old, just seven months from taking control of his first precious five percent of Stark Industries stock. Home, in bed with a book on chemical manufacturing policies in Asian markets, Tony's pretty damn happy. There's a few things he's thinking about while his CD player pours out the tunes, but overall, damn happy.

There's just one small problem.

The latest of Obie's ideas is for Tony to have one last marriage. Two years ago, Tony had grudgingly agreed to a brief contract marriage with a couple in Switzerland. The couple had been thoroughly vetted by both the school and Obie. Tony had a chance to meet them twice, for a meal, before deciding. The sex counselor Obie hired to get Tony back to sanity thought it was an important step in healing. Tony suspected it was an attempt to get reduced interest loans for SI.

During one of the arranged meals, he'd snuck out of the dining room and talked to the wife, off the record. Asked her questions, told her shit about himself. She seemed....nice. Normal.

The couple is looking for a siring contract, not anything kinky. Two weeks of visiting them, one extended heat, renewable until the wife became pregnant. The couple are wealthy, influential. They wanted a solid-line omega who could take the husband's poor sperm count and impregnate his wife with a healthy, beautiful embryo. They specifically wanted a Roanoke.

After a lot of thinking, Tony had agreed. He was sick of being broken.

Besides, he'd never visited Europe.

At first, it was the most boring sex Tony had ever had. Luca and Cherie were depressingly vanilla, but sweet. They petted and kissed him, kept him well fed with various tidbits they fed him by hand, and bought him ugly alpine sweaters when he shivered. Tony let Luca fuck him while Cherie kissed him passionately. Later, Luca guided Tony's cock into Cherie and whispered dirty words into his ear while Tony fucked her.

That part was surprisingly hot.

The senator, may he burn in fiery hell for all eternity, hadn't let Tony use his cock. Had barely touched it except to humiliate him.

Luca and Cherie were all about his cock. To Tony's bewilderment, one evening sprawled in bed, Cherie asked Tony to fuck Luca while she watched. "Don't you think so?" she said to Luca. "Ya," said Luca.

So Tony did.

It was *fantastic*.

Tony was kind of disappointed when Cherie turned out to be pregnant on the first go. She patted his cheek. "I knew it would happen. You are just so potent."

Tony wasn't going to argue with that.

*

So when Obie wants one last contract, Tony is willing to listen. It's short, just a single heat, no renewal option.

Obie showed Tony the morality clauses in the will, and then he showed Tony the case law. If Tony is married a third time, it would go a long way to proving that Tony is a responsible adult. Obie could release control of Tony's shares at an accelerated rate. There was more, but Tony quit listening after that. "I'll do it. If the guy checks out."

He has Pepper check out the prospective spouse. She's an alpha, but she's done background checks before. It's got to be similar, right? Pepper has nothing but positive things to say. Obie's background check is the same.

Na Anderson is the only one who thinks it's a bad idea. They argue about it, but the only evidence she can provide him was that she had a bad feeling about Obie. "You've only met

him *one time*," Tony snapped. "One time!"

Chapter 12

The day Tony leaves for the contract, Na Anderson hurries up to him while the driver puts Tony's luggage in the car. "I just want a minute."

Tony sulks against the car, pretending to ignore her.

She's holding something in her hand. It looks like a pen, but Tony is sure it isn't. "I know you think I'm overreacting."

"You are. I can take care of myself."

"I know that. But I would feel better if--"

"Has anyone told you you're a paranoid old bat?"

Tony sees her face shut down. He knows he went too far, but it's still true. Even his father wasn't as paranoid about security as Na Anderson is.

"Yes," Na Anderson says quietly. Her eyes are tired, her hair is a mess. It's hard to imagine anyone had married her--much less the gossip-mill's five times. Her mousy brown hair has streaks of white in it now.

"Fine." Tony rolls his eyes. "Just do your warning shtick. I don't want to miss my flight."

"I want you to have this. It's a panic button. I've made it so it's untraceable by anyone else, but if something should go wrong, you can tap it with an SOS pattern. I'll get a message and we'll come find you."

"Really paranoid. Batshit paranoid. Does the CIA know you have this?" But Tony cannot resist her tech. He takes the pen and twirls it. "Not going to be all that helpful if I'm in my birthday suit."

"That's why I'm going to implant it. Take off your shoe."

Which is how Tony winds up getting a tiny tracker stuck between his toes. "They're going to think I'm a heroin addict."

"Very funny. Remember, SOS pattern. Try it out."

"Yes, mom." Tony sticks his finger between his grubby toes and taps it out. A small device in her pocket beeps audibly.

When she gives him a goodbye hug, he hugs her back. His old teacher is a lunatic, but harmless.

*

Two days later, Tony is keeping it together only by imagining all the mental notes he has for Na Anderson about her little device. Number one: Make it easier to reach when hogtied.

It's a shame he's going to die before he can tell her thank you for trying.

Chapter 13

Tony wakes up briefly. He's moving, it's dark, there are strangers who smell weird. He grabs whatever he can and fights back. There's a struggle and then a sharp bright pain in his thigh.

*

The second time Tony wakes up, he's in a brightly lit room. Na Anderson is by his bedside, grading papers. It looks like she's rewriting a formula in emphatic red ink.

"Must be alloy week for the third graders," he says. His voice is pure shit.

God, he feels terrible. Everything hurts, and his skin is on fire. There's also something wrong with his mind, like his ears are full of a chorus, but it's not noise.

"I have something that will help with that," she says. She puts two pink pills on the blanket next to his hand.

"What are they?"

"Narcotics."

Tony palms them dry. "The blanket smells wrong, but you smell OK. I smell horrible. Not like me. At all." He's also pretty sure he's high as a kite already.

"I know." Na Anderson looks grim and sad. "Tony, before those meds take effect, I need to ask you some questions."

"I don't remember what happened. I don't want to remember."

"It's OK. I'm not asking about that. Tony, we need to make some choices in your care, and I want you to give us guidance if you can."

Tony's eyes droop closed. His body is angry at him, and he needs to move, but he can't. His belly hurts. Unlike anything he's ever felt, it hurts.

"Tony," she says sharply.

"Don't wanna. You decide."

"Tony," she says again. "Tony, if you do not make the choices, then Obadiah Stane will make them. He is your legal guardian."

Tony shoves the blanket off and tries to sit up. "Fuck. No. No, no, no."

"Shhhh. He's not here. You're safe, at school. I had you moved here. But you have to decide, on record, with a witness. We have a legal notary."

Tony stares down at himself. He's still covered in dried semen and brown blood. His belly looks wrong. "Oh *fuck.*"

"Tony, look at me." Na Anderson's voice is very gentle.

Tony looks at her. He is going to lose it. Would have if the whole world wasn't covered by a comfortable blanket of narcotics. "Get this thing out of me. Right now!" He sounds hysterical, even to himself.

"Tony," she says calmly. "That's only part of it. Can you smell yourself?"

Tony's breathing is going ragged. "That's not real. It's not happening. It's not real. Not happening."

"It's real, it's happened." Na Anderson lays her hand on the bed. "You were bonded, probably by several people. And there's no way to tell what the parentage of the fetus might be, but the pregnancy is increasing the strength of this bond."

Tony's mouth keeps moving. "Not real, not happening." If he says it enough, it will be true.

"We can break that bond, but--"

"Do it! I don't care about buts right now. Get this fucking thing out of me and *get them out of my head!*"

*

Breaking a bond strengthened by pregnancy is supposed to be impossible. No research board in the world would allow it to be studied anyway.

Tony doesn't give a shit.

They're crawling in his mind. He can feel them. More people than he wants to think about. It's like having slime on the inside, and he hates *everything*.

Himself most of all.

*

Na Anderson has to leave to do....something. Tony shakes uncontrollably the entire time she's gone. His head is so full of the angry voices of Them that he's hiding under the bed when the nurse tries to check on him. She comes in, but Tony shoots at her with the crossbow he's rigged up. Her shoes squeak away and no one else comes for a while.

Tony works on refining his weapon. He'd only managed to stick a plastic arrow into the wall. He needs to do better.

When Na Anderson returns, she brings a couple other people. They're all omegas, but they're also all adults. Tony scents the air warily. None of them are bonded.

Na Anderson crouches down. "Tony. We're ready."

He crawls out from under the bed, still shivering. He's wearing only a flappy hospital gown, a plastic wrist bracelet, and a morphine drip. Na Anderson wraps her arms around him and buries her nose into his hair. "We're going to make it better, but it's going to be hard."

*

It's hard.

It's *very* hard.

Chapter 14

When Tony finally claws his way back to some semblance of sanity, a lot has happened. There's a good month or so of time that's just gone completely.

The plane ride, the marriage itself, the EMTs, it's all toast. Tony remembers that first discussion with Na Anderson, conducted in a haze of morphine, and very little else.

He has a picture-perfect memory of her hand holding a red liquid roller pen, marking proofs in bold script. She has a burn scar on the first knuckle of her hand, workshop black grease under her thumbnail. She's wearing a shirt his mom would have called aubergine, with a dark red flannel plaid over it, and her eyes are clear but so sad. There's a long ugly scratch on her left cheek, and a bruise on her temple.

Years later, Tony wonders whether he put those marks on her. Whether he lashed out with some weapon, desperate as animal.

He's never asked, and she's never mentioned it.

What she did, or got someone else to do, is a merciful black hole of stagnant memory.

He has nightmares full of terror and pain, choruses in his head, a belly full of ice.

Sometimes, but not very often, the nightmares are followed by other dreams. Blood, the smell of earth, the smell of stone, the weight of bodies tangled in his. These should be terrible dreams, but they're not.

These rare dreams always end with the smell of sunlight on granite, and Tony will wake feeling centered, calmer, at peace.

*

These days, he sleeps in a small space he's built at the back nook of the least used and dirtiest workshop. Tony's made the walls of oak timber, rebar, and concrete. He's added kevlar shielding, motion sensors, cameras, bugs. There's a long wicked knife he keeps under the pillow of his nest of blankets. The whole place is rigged to blow sky high, just in case. If he needs to, he can go out with a bang. If Na Anderson finds him paranoid, she's kind enough not to say.

Sometimes he'll find little gifts by the door. A pair of night vision goggles. A box of sandwiches. A filter to remove common sex drugs from a water supply. A few new CDs.

Sometimes, he gives her gifts back. A repaired welding glove. A new engine design. A handwritten review of the new encyclopedia of manufacturing listing its defects and errors. Some bootleg Nirvana performances he's hacked off some site and burned to CD. A tiny animatronic donkey whose ears swivel. A handful of fall leaves carefully preserved with a polymer he invented to hold their color against the tide of time.

Tony doesn't know what happened. What she did, or got someone to do, to get his mind back.

Tony can makes a few guesses, of course. He tries not to think about it, because he doesn't want to know, but his mind has a hard time shutting off now.

Curled in his small nest of blankets, he listens to her latest CD, trying to block the flow of thoughts.

The bond breaking is the most curious part, but it's a subject that's generally considered either impossible, immoral, ludicrous, or stupid. Tony's pretty sure the break happened before the abortion, but thinking about why tends to give him blackouts. He steers his mind in another direction. He's got some scars now. When he first woke up, well, not first, but at some random point in time when he woke up, there was a scattering of brown-red scabs and yellow-brown bruises around each wrist. Not so many on his ankles, but some. That's from pulling against restraints, probably metal ones, but Tony's honestly not sure. Could have been hemp rope for all he knows. Or cares.

The scars on his neck are what keep him from people, or at least that's what he tells himself.

Long, thin, professionally closed with neat nearly invisible stitches right over the scent glands. Yeah, Tony's pretty sure whatever that was it wasn't strictly legal, and he's also pretty sure they happened post-marriage.

He doesn't give a shit, but he doesn't want anyone to get in trouble. So he hides.

It's an excuse, but he needs one, and that's enough.

There's other evidence. Bite marks on his shoulders that don't make him upset. A bruise right above his hipbone that he's taken to touching absently, like a talisman. When it's gone, he draws it on again with a sepia pen, a simple odd oval of comfort in a language only he hears.

*

There's no more voices in his head. No more chorus. No more angry-sick-furious feelings from people he doesn't even know.

But the scars on his neck, the bruise on his hip, the strange smell of sunlight on granite that drifts in his memory... They tell him whatever happened, it worked, but he won't be able to bond. Not again.

So, he works.

Eventually, some of the memories from the marriage itself return. Tony thinks that's a shame. He'd have preferred they stayed gone, but his body always has been one for betrayal.

*

No one has to know that Tony builds his first AI in a frustrated attempt to have someone else around who can't feel things right. Whose mind plays like a jagged needle on a record player set on an uneven surface, skipping unexpectedly, running smooth other times.

*

Later, Tony finds out that the school has him listed as ill and under a doctor's care. The school doctor is the one who talks to Obie, giving him soothing medical mumbo-jumbo so Tony doesn't have to. Someone, probably Alex, tells Pepper that Tony's going to be incommunicado for a while.

It takes a couple more months for Tony to come back to himself enough to interact much with the other students.

*

It takes time before he can talk to an alpha, even Pepper, on the phone.

But he does it, because he has to. If he's broken forever, they win.

He won't let them win.

Chapter 15

Tony has to stay at school, on campus. He smells strange and it's going to come across as very odd since he's currently an omega who was recently married. There's also the scars. He still has some trouble with nerve damage in his left wrist, where the bondage games got out of hand, but it's getting better.

Obie calls as often as he can.

It's incredibly awkward. Tony doesn't blame him. Na Anderson does. Tony holds onto the possibility of getting the Stark Industries stock early, because it gives him something to focus on besides the nightmares.

That works OK until he mentions it to Obie.

There's a dreadful pause. "My boy," Obie says. "I think--they must not let you read the papers. At school."

Which is how Tony finds out about the photos.

*

The board feels that at this time, given the situation, it would not be prudent for Stark Industries to have Tony in control of even a small number of shares of his very own company.

He should take more time. Rest.

Or consider settling down--with someone who would exert a positive, mature influence on his behavior.

Which is how Tony finds out that the board wants him to marry Obie.

*

Once the photos are out, there's no hope for Tony to be judged a responsible young omega. He's being passed around at a party, used in an orgy, and context doesn't really matter. So what if he's glassy-eyed? So what if his wrists are bruised and bloody from pulling at the restraints? He looks like he's loving it.

The gossip rags sure think so, although they have to print black bars across parts of him.

*

Tony feels sick with shame whenever he sees the photos.

The rest of his life, whenever he's asked about them, he smiles widely and cracks a lascivious joke.

*

It takes Tony a while to track down all the photos. When he does, he goes to the next Stark Industries board meeting.

At each place, he lays down a presentation binder.

He'd asked Pepper, during one of their rare phone calls, to make these presentation binders, but she'd kind of flipped out on him. He wasn't sure what to do about her crying, so he kept telling her he was fine now. Perfectly fine. That just made her cry harder, for some reason. But it's OK, he can use a three hole punch when he has to.

Everyone files in, and Obie isn't all that pleased to see him.

"Tony, what a surprise, I think maybe--" His arm goes around Tony, but Tony is used to getting out of being touched now. He eels away.

Tony waits until the last board member sits. Then he begins.

"If everyone can turn to page three. Why yes, I do think that's George Reynolds with his big fat cock shoved down my underage throat." Tony smiles blindingly at Mr. George Reynolds, board member. "How are you, George? It's been so long since I've had a chance to say hello. And how is little Mr George? Still giving you some trouble staying up?"

Reynolds shoves his chair back, but his face is beet red. "How dare you, you little sl--"

"Now, now," Tony says, smile shark-wide. "Let's not be hasty. I certainly didn't mean to signal you out. There's plenty more of me to go around. Try page five."

One of the board, an iron-haired friend of his dad's, turns the page and flinches back.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Tony says. "Maybe I should have gone for the poster sized option. I certainly hope you can see who's holding my wrist there. The camera angle isn't the best, but I think we all recognize Sam Hoover's comb-over, don't we? And the mole on his bald-spot? The age spots on his hands as he's tightening those restraints that cut into my skin on page 7? Whoops, wouldn't want to spoil the surprise."

One of the board, a matronly woman who runs a bank in Manhattan, has flipped ahead. She shuts the presentation. Her mouth is a thin line and her fingers are trembling.

Tony's pretty sure this is all news to her, and he's got his first vote.

Across the wide conference table, Tony sees Rich Werther flip frantically through the binder. Tony remembers him, but he doesn't have a clear shot. Nice to have confirmation that his memory is still good, though. He ambles over and leans down, one hand on each side of Rich. Whispers, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Was it good for you, too, Rich? Did you like using those toys on me while I tried to crawl away?"

Rich shoves back, but Tony has him trapped. He's gained a lot of muscle since he was that scared shitless kid. "I wonder what your wife would say? Maybe I should give her some tips

about how you like it."

"You can't," Rich hisses.

"Oh, but I think you'll find I can," Tony says. He's meeting other eyes around the table. Some are guilty, some shocked, a few disgusted.

Tony moves on to the next one at the table. Fiona Wildwood, who'd ridden him like a pony at the fair.

When Tony reaches Stephen Atchison, Obie seems to have had enough. "Tony--"

"You had Reeve killed, yes, I know. Or good as. I don't care. Just because he threw the party doesn't mean he was solely responsible. Sure, my estimable spouse set up the canapés and doped me full of liquor and good time pills, but he wasn't the only one who took a spin on the carnival ride. I'd say a good third of you enjoyed a little time in the fun house riding my tilt-a-whirl."

Tony grabs a presentation off the table and flips it open. "Page 17 is a legally binding agreement. It states that the collective board of Stark Industries declares that one Anthony Edward Stark is fully capable of making decisions on his own behalf, and more than capable of making decisions on the company's behalf, and that given the provisions of Howard Stark's will, they are declaring him in full control of his own assets, including his share of this company, from this day forward."

The woman in the red suit pulls a pen from her purse and begins to read, initialing at each green flag and signing at each red one.

"Now just one minute," the guy from legal says.

Tony sits down on the conference table so his crotch is right in front of him. "I'm sorry, sugarpuff, did I leave you out?"

"No! Yes! I wasn't even there!"

Tony looks around the table. "Not important enough to invite? Or is it that lawyers are boring in bed? Anyone know?"

"Mr Stark! Na Stark!"

"Aw, can't keep track?" Tony fluffs his hair affectionately, and the lawyer slaps his hand away.

"Na Stark," the lawyer says, blushing but trying for stern. "I have to advise you that any contract signed here today might be deemed null and void as it could conceivably be considered under duress."

Tony leans into him until they're nose to nose. "Do you know, counselor, I don't believe any soul here gave a shit whether *I* was under duress."

The lawyer swallows. "I--understand that, Na Stark. I merely wanted you to understand that they may possibly try to exploit a loophole. In the--in the--in the law. You see?"

Tony pats him on the shoulder. "I do see." He hops off the table and goes back to strolling around the room.

"As my fine little lawyer friend here says, maybe you'll consider these photos a threat. I'm sure that's just not possible, though. Is evidence of a crime a threat?"

"If it's presented to the perpetrator and used for blackmail," one of the suits says. Tony can't remember his name.

"That's only if the victim doesn't go the police," Tony said helpfully. "And I know these photos have been handed over to the police."

Obie is leaning back in his chair, watching Tony. He doesn't say anything.

"You sent them to the police?" Reynolds is nearly shrieking. "Do you have any idea who I am? Who my family is?"

Banker woman slaps her hand down on the table. "Do you have any idea what you look like, Reynolds? I have a boy Stark's age. If I found out you'd hurt my Mike like this, I would hunt you down like a dog and put a bullet in your brain."

Tony blinks. The alpha pheromones pouring off her are pretty strong. She is really not kidding.

"Myra," Reynolds says, uneasy, "I would never--Mike is--"

"A good omega," Tony says flatly. "Not a slut like me. Yes, you made that very clear to me. Now. Everything in this folder has been turned over to the authorities as evidence in a crime."

"You can't do this!"

"*I* didn't, in fact," Tony said, turning on the newest speaker. Some journo at one of the less sleazy rags had turned out to have a conscience. Puzzling, but there it was. "But it's been done. The question is not whether there's evidence of you all fucking me senseless at a party. The question is whether there's evidence that you fucked me senseless at a party so you could ruin my reputation and thereby steal my company."

The room is dead silent.

One by one, board members pick up their pens.

*

When Tony leaves, he feels Obie's eyes on him all the way out the door. No one else suggests he marry Obie to repair his reputation, and Tony is glad.

Chapter 16: Interlude

Chapter Notes

> This interlude jumps forward in time, but contains no spoilers of the future (since I already revealed in the fic description that Tony will eventually become Iron Man).
>
> I'm sure it says something about me, but I quite enjoyed writing this particular chapter. People say revenge is best served cold, but I've always felt it's nice with mulled burgundy and a stick of a cinnamon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Appendix to Report on A.E. "Tony" Stark

Submitted by: Agent Natasha Romanov

Reviewed by: Agent P. Coulson

Accepted by: Director N. Fury

EYES ONLY

The matter of William C Reeve, A. E. Stark's third contract spouse, has been resolved to Agent's satisfaction.

Mr. William C Reeve was a prominent member of the Wall Street elite. As chair of Lending at G.S. Holdings, he controlled access to billions of dollars of lending capital. All reports indicate he had final say over loan amounts, interest charged, repayment plans, etc. All SEC's attempted investigations into his rumored malfeasances were thwarted, some say deliberately (Agent's opinion is: definitely) by various beneficiaries of those malfeasances. Reeve controlled access to funds for many Fortune 500 companies.

As you are aware, A.E. Stark's guardian arranged with Reeve for a short non-pregnancy contract. Previous reports of Reeve's sexual preferences and proclivities had been positive; he had been happily married for many years to his beta wife, Addy. His contract spouses reputedly spoke well of him. He was not known to frequent prostitutes or attend sex clubs. According to the background check performed by Ms. P. Potts (see attached), Mr Reeve has a strong preference for vanilla penetrative sex with androgynous omegas; this is a common alpha preference, as you know. Reports indicated no preference for voyeurism or severe violence, although Reeve supposedly did employee collars and short leashes for his omegas, and mild spanking. He was fond of taking his omega spouses to social events during their off-heat periods.

Agent of Record personally interviewed Reeve's primary spouse, his contracted omegas, prostitutes who frequent financier bars/social hangouts, bartenders and waitstaff, etc. All reports indicate that his sexual preference during an omega heat marriage was for private penetrative sex; in addition, Reeve was known to be possessive and doting, preferring younger omegas whom he could shower with jewelry or gifts and dazzle with money.

Note: Even a strong deep-level background check would likely not have discovered the following information recounted below.

According to Reeve's personal assistant, Mike Jefferson, Reeve was concerned with the increased tensions in the Middle East. G.S. Holdings has significant oil interests. In the two months prior to the contract, Reeve had no fewer than sixteen lunch dates with O. Stane. Jefferson states that the purpose of the marriage was to cement production of elite weaponry necessary to the protection of these oil assets. G.S. Holdings would provide the capital, Stane would provide the know-how, and if a conflict arose, both would profit significantly. The money lent to Stark Industries was under extremely favorable terms; repayment would be fudged to less lenient terms should a conflict arise, thereby easily laundering profits to G.S. Jefferson went on to say that he personally believed that the purpose of the contract marriage was to convince A. E. Stark of the benefits of marriage to an older, respectable husband. In other words, Jefferson assumed that Stark would so enjoy Reeve that he'd marry Stane, thereby giving Stane full and complete control of Stark assets. Agent's firm opinion is that Jefferson was unaware of his employer's role in the planned sexual assaults; Jefferson continues to believe that A.E. Stark was handed off to others while his employer's 'back was turned'. While Stane is certainly capable of this level of betrayal, Agent has tracked down seventeen witnesses to the events in question and compared their reports. Reeve was present; he was responsible for administering some of the initial drugs.

It is this Agent's opinion that the intended consequence of A.E. Stark's third contract marriage was death ruled as an act of misadventure, blamed on the victim; Agent believes this was planned in advance by both Reeve and Stane.

Concerning the events of the night in question, you have seen the photos, and you have read my other reports. I will not recount the events in detail here. While some additional details were gleaned from interviewing the numerous witnesses/participants, Agent has decided not to recount them for the sake of A.E. Stark's privacy; they add little that was not suspected.

One last note: Agent was able to determine that Stane was not physically present during the night in question, but had planned to be available to be called to the scene/hospital. The ambulance carrying A.E. Stark was travelling to Sacred Heart Memorial, the closest major medical facility with an omega trauma unit when it was dispatched to Antioch Research by a police-captain level override. While the override codes all checked out, no police captain could be found who admitted to using those codes. During the interim drive to Antioch, a medical team acting under the auspices of the Miss Price Academy was routed to intercept this ambulance, and a transfer was made. A.E. Stark recuperated at the Academy's own small medical center; legal documents show that the transfer was authorized under the Headmaster's authority, citing the improved recovery rate of being treated in familiar surroundings. Obadiah Stane was notified of his ward's poor condition three minutes after

A.E. Stark entered school grounds. While Stane attempted to have Stark transferred to a more extensive research facility via medical helicopter, this request was denied.

As noted in previous reports, Agent was able to track sources for the society gossip stories about A.E. Stark promiscuous behavior that were released in gradually increasing frequency beginning eight months prior to his final contracted marriage. All sources trace back to Stane.

Reeve's Death: Final Report

As noted in my initial report, rumors immediately arose about the mugging death of William Reeve. Most rumors suspected that Stane had placed a hit on Reeve for defiling his ward and/or the scandal's impact on the price of Stark Industries stock. An additional plausible motive would be to cover up Stane's role in this incident.

Agent has fully investigated: police reports, autopsies, other mugging victims, detectives, medical examiners, Stane's personal assistants and accountants, etc.

There is no evidence to suggest that Stane had Reeve hit.

Agent apologizes for the length of time it has taken to discover the full facts of this matter. The trail was unusually difficult, almost baroque. It took over six months, but the Agent has determined that Reeve's death was the work of Killian Stevens, sometimes agent of WSC.

Killian Stevens is primarily an assassin; his hits are too numerous to mention here. Please see SHIELD's file. Stevens was unwilling to discuss many details of this hit with the Agent; such discretion is not unusual, but the hit was, if Agent may say so, unusually small-time for Stevens. Stevens reported only that his client requested the following: a violent, painful death; that no one be falsely accused of the crime; that the hit be accomplished within two months. Stevens reported one last thing: The client did not argue about the price; offered half upfront, half on delivery; paid in full, tipped 18%. So few clients appreciate service industries anymore. Given Stevens' reticence on his client's identity, Agent was forced to trace the hit to its source via other means. This took an additional three months.

The hit was commissioned and paid for by V. D. Anderson, teacher of Engineering, Miss Price's Academy for Talented Youth.

cc: Eyes only

Chapter End Notes

Regular updates will resume Saturday. Thanks for the comments, everyone! I hope to respond to them all soon.

Chapter 17

Even with full control of the stock, Tony is in a shaky position. He can't hold the CEO position or Stark will lose its Department of Defense contracts. Obie remains in charge. Tony's not even on the payroll in research. His official title is Head of Marketing.

But.

It soon becomes an open secret in military circles that every major weapon goes through Tony Stark's drafting table at some point. Obie insists that Tony do most of his designing off site. The school is secure, and when Tony finally graduates, Tony will make sure his first house is just as secure.

*

On the surface, things are good.

Tony is an engineer, despite his father, despite the board, despite fucking MIT's backass entrance qualifications, and despite two ex-husbands.

Pepper transitions from CEO of Tri-Tech Pharmaceuticals to Tony Stark's PA. They let Tom and Alex take over Tri-Tech Pharm. Tony's got enough money now, and Alex is using Tri-Tech profits to buy his own PVC company.

Tony misses just focusing on school, where he had an alpha-free omega quasi-family, but he knows that it wasn't real. Not like Pepper's family at Thanksgiving is real. And he also knows that the people at school have their own families, their own lives. He has to grow up, deal with things by himself for a change.

When it's time to think of moving into his own very own home, Tony's pulled up short. He doesn't want to live in his parent's mansion (any of them). Obie's suggests an apartment or condo in one of the (many) buildings Tony's inherited but doesn't yet control.

Tony says that's very sensible, and Obie sends him a list of available places. That night he finds himself sleeping in the blanket nest in the workshop. Curled up in a flannel shirt, surrounded by the smell of forging, he gets the sneaking suspicion maybe the apartment isn't going to work.

For two days, he's twitchy and easily startled. He drops his soldering iron three times, destroying a whole day's work. Finally, he sets the iron down, puts his palms flat on the workbench and notices that he's shaking.

Yeah, apartments appear to be a no-go.

*

Tony has Pepper make some discrete calls. There's real estate available in New York, but it costs a small fortune. She gives him the locales of some possibilities. He looks at her faxes, wrinkles his nose. Pepper has excellent taste, but none of these will work.

Tony has one of the school's cars drive him into the city. He takes a chaperone out of pure habit, even though they're not required. Tony doesn't even notice he's done it until he's downtown.

The Miss Price Academy chaperones are hard to shake, but they're discrete as hell. Whatever, he decides, and hopes they're wearing sensible shoes.

They are.

Tony's arranged for a few appointments. The first four aren't what he's looking for, but the fourth has possibilities.

It's a huge block-sized building with mixed-use heritage and a certain gray industrial vibe. There's some parking garages, a basement, a delivery bay. Tony makes them open the delivery bay doors, and he uses his surveying equipment (his measuring tape is too small) to check the size.

Some of the floors have ancient industrial equipment still in situ, other are dirty and covered in dust. There's some semi-finished apartments, some loft-type spaces, some offices. Tony looks at the frosted glass door to an old dental office and wonder if he's passed Na Anderson on the paranoia scale, because just the thought of a glass door is giving him hives.

On the top floor is a big loft space. One wall looks out onto some truly grunged out tarpaper roof. Tony checks, and yes, there's an access door. He steps out, wanders around, pokes at the giant ventilation fans. He's been tuning out the real estate agent cum slum lord's patter for the past hour, until the guy just finally shut up.

"Does this have a helicopter pad?" Tony asks, poking at the nubby brown roofing surface.

"You could paint one on," the guy says. "There's probably room."

Tony shoots him a look and does not say anything about load bearing walls, support beams, helicopter weights, or the laws of physics.

He swings himself into a service shaft, checks some wiring, pulls himself back up. When he wanders back into the penthouse space, he's looking for other things: outlet size and placement, layout, access to the big elevator, northern light, plumbing. He finds that, but he finds other things, too. Carved woodwork around the ceilings. A smaller room at the back. A bathroom with a clawfoot tub and a toilet that doesn't work.

"I'll take it," Tony says.

If the guy finds that odd, he's greedy enough not to argue. Tony offers to have the paperwork drawn up immediately.

"Great," the guy says. "Tuesday?"

"No," Tony says, "now."

It costs him a hefty bribe, but Tony can afford it. While Pepper works on the paperwork from her office in midtown, Tony sits on the loading dock swinging his feet and making a few calls. He has locks and industrial chain delivered from several locksmiths he's called at random. The rest of his calls are to various workmen. Plumbers, painters, restorers, carpenters.

As it gets past five, Tony watches people fill the sidewalks of his new neighborhood.

His last call is to get supper delivered. He picks someplace French his mom liked. They don't normally deliver, but yes, of course, Na Stark, it's not a problem whatsoever. He orders some of everything, in case the driver or chaperone don't like something, and he gets one of each dessert they sell.

Tony celebrates buying his first house with two strangers and a stomach-ache.

*

It takes a while for the building to be ready. Tony paid for it with his ill gotten gains from Tri-Tech Pharma. Being a drug king pin is still pretty lucrative. Tony knows other people have figured out the formula, but the ingredients are tricky to get mixed properly. They still make lots of cash once Tom figures out how to make it possible for consumers to tell Tri-Tech legit illegal drugs from other people's illegit illegal drugs. Tony's not against competitors on principle, but he dislikes the poor quality control their rivals use. Nobody should have Fuck You fail to work.

Tony mooches around the school, ostensibly doing post-grad classes, while mostly writing research papers and designing things that kill people.

It's not a recipe for good quality mental health, but it beats the alternative.

On a whim, Tony goes to one of those semi-sleazy military-industrial complex shindigs. He wears a good (more Italian) suit, some ridiculous omega cologne, and eyeliner, because no matter what anyone else says, he is not hiding.

To Tony's surprise, a stacked brunette in a tiny dress sidles up to him. While he's sipping his whiskey and wondering how her dress even stays up, she offers to take him out back and blow him. She's a beta, and she's gorgeous, and he's drunk.

There are worse ideas he's had than getting blown by a beautiful woman behind a garden arbor. But...

Tony offers to take to her to the Palace for a good long fuck instead, and her reply is a dazzling smile.

What the hell, he thinks, and then his limo is there. She sits in his lap on the drive to the hotel, squirming energetically. Tony's not all that into kissing or into her, but it's OK and he doesn't have a flashback, so that's a plus.

In the room, he tumbles her down on the expensive sheets. He's feeling stranger and stranger, but maybe it's the booze. Like he's detached, not quite there, watching this all happen to someone else.

Well, whatever.

Her dress is off, and his pants are down, and she seems surprised that he wants to go down on her, but she doesn't argue. He gives her orgasm after orgasm with his mouth and hands until she's incoherent with pleasure and out of breath. If he never gets hard enough to fuck her, at least she doesn't complain.

He leaves her sleeping, puts his clothes back on, and goes home.

It's the first consensual sex he's had in a year, and he doesn't know or care what her name is.

*

Tony spends a lot of time designing death-dealing weaponry, but it's hard to get a clear picture of how well this stuff works without knowing details from someone who's used it. He needs to find someone on the ground who's actualled fired the damn things. He puts Pepper onto the problem.

Pepper can solve *anything*.

Well. Most things.

*

While the carpenters are finishing the stairs to his loft, Tony gets to work on the security system. He's designing it himself and building all the parts.

The first thing he does is make the security system voice activated.

If he calls for help, if he so much as says a few key words, the system will alert.

Later, he adds a biometric heart-rate-reading failsafe. If he's within the building walls or on the roof, the system will track his readings, call an alert if the heart goes too high. If his biometric signature leaves the building without proper voice authorization, an alert will go out. There will be more, but that's probably more than enough to start.

When Tony asks Na Anderson to install the failsafe chip in his thigh, she just cleans the spot with an alcohol wipe and does it.

"I can make you one, too," he offers, not sure what to think about the look in her eyes.

She looks back at him for a long time. "Keyed to your house?"

Tony hasn't thought about it, tilts his head. "I'd like you to visit."

"I have a hard time leaving the grounds." Her voice is steady, calm. "I don't get out much."

Oh. She's hardly left the grounds since he's been here, has she? Huh. Only a couple field trips, accompanied by a bunch of teachers and hordes of students. Tony picks up the syringe they'd used, toys with it. "I can key it the school."

Na Anderson moves closer, touches the back of his hand. "Key it to both."

*

Obie tells him that SI's having some minor profit margin difficulties. He recommends relocating corporate headquarters to the West coast. Closer to Silicon Valley, the Far East import ports, lots of highly skilled labor, better for Tony's recovery (whatever the fuck that means since Tony is *fine*).

Tony isn't attached to New York yet, but he thinks of Na Anderson on a flight to LA, shakes his head. "Stark's here. We don't want to look like we're retreating. Gives the wrong impression. I've got some new satellite tech just off my desk. Here, appease the board with this."

He'd built it for his own amusement, and because he needed something that could pinpoint a tracking device over several miles but to within a foot or two. He'd gotten damn close, and nobody needed to know why the idea had come to him, right?

Obie looks over the new plans, obviously pleased. Of course he should be pleased, Tony is a genius with this stuff. It's a miracle SI has survived this long without Tony's designs.

But Tony keeps his mouth shut and steals one of Obie's favorite pens and a couple of peppermints off Obie's desk.

*

In between house renovations ("you mean *giant strange random warehouse renovations*, Tony," Pepper always says), Tony decides to give in to both Pepper and Obie and visit a damn shrink.

Again.

This time he makes his own appointment, picks his own doctor, and shows up igcognito in a ratty Grunge is Dead tee shirt, workstained jeans, and red Converse. He doesn't actually notice his outfit until he's past the receptionist, handing over some truly pointless forms (no, he doesn't have insurance, yes, he can afford to pay in cash, fuck you), but hey, maybe his backbrain is doing better than he realizes. It got him dressed today, right?

The doctor's name is Mrs Katz, and she's appallingly tall with wiry dark hair and glasses. Her voice is booming in the small office, and she doesn't tone it down. Tony refuses to feel afraid of her. Starks don't show fear.

He's wearing his lucky sunglasses purely by accident. Yes, OK, maybe he had to take them out of his keepsake box to put them on, but it's fine because they match his hair. Whatever his hair looks like today.

She has a fresh legal pad, a cheap ball point pen, all set.

"What are you going to write down?" Tony asks, before she can start.

"Notes from our sessions together," she says. "Unless you'd rather I didn't."

He hops up from his chair in front of her, paces around the room, hands shoved in his pockets. He's looking for security cameras, but it's not like she can guess that. "Where do you store these notes?"

"In a locked cabinet in my back office. We use InteliSure."

It's not a bad security company, actually, and Tony's kind of annoyed he can't bitch about the risks. He glares at her over the top of his shades instead and harrumphs.

"Would you prefer I keep audio files instead? Or no recordings?" She's acting like it's normal to ask, but Tony's pretty sure regular people are not nearly security conscious enough to understand how vulnerable most medical files are to anyone who wants to peek. He's hacked enough systems to *know*.

His lack of answer doesn't phase her either. She just waits for a little while and introduces another topic: his goal for the therapy.

Tony doesn't feel like telling her the real reasons for showing up in her damn office. He claims to be stressed instead, because stress is a *killer*. Everyone knows that. It's also nicely vague, right? Can't be traced to any one source. Everyone gets stressed.

That goes fine, and she asks reasonable questions about sources of stress. He decides on the spot to lie and say he has family, but his parents are dead, and he substitutes some blood-relative relationships for the aliases he's invented for various people in his life.

Things get a bit sticky when she asks him how he's sleeping. Tony fires back a bunch of questions: why do you want to know, what has sleep got to do with anything, what do you mean do I sleep in a bed where else would I sleep?

It leaves him room to not answer instead of lie. Even Tony knows that lying to a therapist is stupid. She can't help him if she's going off false data, but there are things he just doesn't like to talk about. (If sometimes he still sleeps in a small heavily guarded room in a workshop or under a bench or in an attic with a knife next to his hand, that's not wrong. It's just...eccentric.)

Instead of getting angry, she offers him some references to the link between stress cycles and sleep patterns. He grunts, because OK, that's reasonable, that's good, at least she's done her research.

Their time is getting to an end, and she hasn't written anything down on the legal pad.

Tony asks her what she would write if she didn't consider him fucking paranoid.

Mrs Katz pauses for a moment. "Check for post traumatic stress disorder."

Could be worse.

Tony hands the receptionist a fold of bills. He lied about his address on the forms (it's easy to put in false addresses, no one even remembers things like the UN Building or the Omega Alliance address, sheesh). She takes the cash and tries to tell him he's overpaying, but he waves it off, walks back out to the driver.

Chapter 18

Tony tries to have lunch with Pepper once a week. He doesn't have set class schedules anymore, and he comes into the city often. It's just that he gets nervous sitting still in a crowded restaurant, surrounded by people.

Sometimes, she packs a lunch for them. They sit in Central Park, or near a random fountain.

One afternoon, Pepper has lunch delivered to her office. She puts the delivery boxes on her desk and shuts the door, so her receptionist won't bug them.

Tony finds he's not hungry so he just paces her office instead, poking at her ridiculous decorations. There's some art, some desk gadgets, some photos of her family, her degrees from college. It's nice.

Pepper opens the door again, tells him she shouldn't have ordered Italian, her office is going to smell like garlic for a week at this rate.

Tony can't quite sit down for the whole meal, but he manages half a salad and a breadstick before he paces again, telling her about weapons he's working on.

"I'm not afraid of you," Tony says suddenly, turning from her window.

Peppers looks back at him, meets his eyes. "Yes, you are."

Tony goes back to telling her about his latest missile, and if he's pacing while he does it, well fuck it.

The next time she sets up lunch, he skips. It's mean and it's stupid and it's self-destructive.

But hey, welcome to his life.

*

Tony goes to a stupid party that night instead, one that's got zero strategic purpose for SI. Tony gets shit-faced drunk and picks up a nice alpha woman named...something. He can't quite remember.

She fucks him in the hotel room, he gets her off in the shower, she scrapes her nails down his sides and tells him he'd better get hard enough to ride. His dick is suddenly hard, and he's on his back, and she's over him, fucking herself on his dick, and his eyes shut tight, and he can't remember exactly what he's supposed to do here, but it doesn't matter. She gets what she wants, and he puts on his pants, and if he didn't actually enjoy it, what difference does it make?

*

Tony moves into his new house on a gray rainy day in November. He still hasn't told anyone but Pepper where it's located. Obie calls it the BatCave, and Tony takes the teasing good-naturedly. He lets Obie set up a second location, a very fancy penthouse decorated in a style to suit his station as young omega heir of a fabulous fortune. There's a certain amount of ridiculous gilt, which Tony has Pepper scrap in favor of modern lines and some new art.

Tony nevers sleeps there, but he can host parties in it, and it's a place for mail to get delivered.

*

The first night alone in his own home, Tony can't sleep. He ends up in his workshop (newly fitted out with *everything*), talking to his robots. They can't talk back, but it's a little less lonely.

Tony gets to work on an AI that can talk back. Everyone needs a hobby. If he's building an AI to manage an entire multi-story warehouse's security system, well what the fuck ever, genius billionaire inventor.

*

He still calls Na Anderson once a week, but he tries not to visit often. She has her life, her own research, her own work, new kids to train up in the pleasures of alloy creations.

*

Pepper introduces Tony to a tall, handsome man one afternoon.

"Ensign Rhodes, I'd like you to meet Tony Stark."

Tony holds out his hand. Rhodes has keen eyes, but he smells like a beta. Controlled, calm, straightforward. "A pleasure, Ensign Rhodes."

The man shakes his hand, keeping eye contact. "Call me Rhodey. Your assistant told me you're looking for someone to help give you feedback on weapons. Especially field feedback."

"That's right," Tony says. Rhodes is not in uniform, but he moves just like the military men Tony remembers from home. "I can fix problems, but only if I know what they are. That's where you'd come in."

"And I'd get paid for this?"

"Yup." Tony uses his best charming smile, angles his body so he's soft, non-threatening. "Pepper's in charge of payroll, but we'll make it worth your while."

Rhodes considers for a long second. "The R23 rifle is crap. Bitch pulls to the left most of the time, and it jams about 30% of the time. I fucking hate it."

Tony blinks. "Always to the left?"

Rhodes nods, sharp.

"Good to know. I'll see what I can do."

"You've never fired one before?" Rhodes is looking at him intently.

"Well, no." Come on, isn't it obvious? Tony's an omega. He hasn't even learned to drive a damn car.

"Come to the base at 4 o'clock, tomorrow. Ask for me. I'll hook you up."

Tony blinks. He'd love that, but... "Won't you get in trouble?"

Rhodes just smiles, and Pepper leads him away.

*

The heats, when Tony can't put them off with drugs, are....not good.

One evening, Tony drunk calls an escort service. "Hey, can I get omegas delivered?"

"Certainly, sir. Male or female?"

Wow. "Ladies. Lots and lots of ladies." He takes another long pull off the whiskey bottle. Yeah, this should be good.

"How many would you like?"

Tony casts around for a nice random number. A dozen is too cliché. Thirteen is unlucky. Fifteen is too many, surely. Nine is divisible by three three times. "Nine. Can you do nine?"

"Of course. What credit card will you be using?"

Tony picks one at random. All his credit cards have astronomical limits, but who knows how much an orgy costs. He rattles off the card numbers and the address. "Can I pick, like, flavors? What sort of omegas do you guys have on tap?"

Lots of flavors, lots of types. Tony's awash in a sea of other people's kinks, and he lets the operator's voice flow over him for a while. "Can you send a variety pack?" Tony asks, because he can do sarcasm even while he's having trouble breathing.

Of course they can.

"But only ladies. Really really hot ladies," Tony tells them. Of course, sir.

He's passed out a little when the delivery shows up. Nine omega women in short ridiculous outfits, and a couple of large bruisers in monkey suits. Tony buzzes them to the fourth floor, where's he got a kind of public area. Couches, tables, conference spaces.

Nobody bats an eye.

Tony sends the suits away, but they only agree to hang out in the car. They're not going too far away, because they need to be there as soon as Tony kicks the girls out again. A bunch of recently sexed omegas is probably a security risk even in his neighborhood. OK. Tony can work with that.

He gets the girls to drag couch cushions into a big pile in the middle of the floor. They're giggling, happy, some of them stoned or high, but Tony doesn't mind. He offers high quality booze to everyone. Some take him up on it, some don't.

They're happy to have a mellow orgy with an eccentric guy who doesn't give a shit about his cock but wants to give them lots of orgasms, it turns out.

Go figure.

Chapter 19: Interlude 2

[Clipping from the Phoenix Sun Newspaper, August 17]

Prominent financier Richard "Rich" Werther was arrested at the Phoenix International Airport today on drug charges. Maricopa County Sheriff's office states that Mr Werther, 53, had 3 ounces of Desirea, a Schedule II controlled substance that is illegal to possess without a prescription, and almost 6 ounces of the street drug UnDone. According to deputies, the UnDone was in sufficient purity to be considered a dealable amount. Mr Werther's attorney charges that the drugs were planted, possibly by a financial rival. While in police custody, sheriffs state that Mr Werther became aggressive and agitated. He was placed in County Holding, pending an additional assault on an officer charge, rather than be granted bail. According to court documents recently acquired by the Sun, Mr Werther was involved in a fight with another prisoner, during which he suffered multiple stab wounds. The Sun has been running a series on the dangers of prisons. See E4 for our article, "Prison Reform Now."

*

[Clipping from the Wall Street Journal, September 22]

Mr Richard Werther has announced his retirement from various prominent positions in the financial industry today. Rumors of an IRS audit follow shortly on the heels of a recent sex-drug scandal in Arizona which culminated in his stabbing during a short-stay in prison. Mr Werther denies the IRS audit rumor and states that he is withdrawing from his business activities to focus on regaining his physical health. According to sources at the SEC, Mr Werther may not be out of hot water yet. A recent SEC investigation into Werther's dealings has brought to light multiple unethical and illegal dealings. Charges of insider trading and fiscal malfeasance are expected to be brought by the New York District Attorney's Office as soon as October, and by the Federal District Attorney's Office by as shortly as December. Mr Werther's wife has also recently filed divorce papers; she is seeking a full sixty percent of his assets under a clause in their prenuptial agreement, which grants a penalty award if one spouse is caught cheating. In addition to his position at RER Holdings, Werther served on the board of Stark Industries. See B7 for our report on Stark Industries' recent innovative alloy production system being deployed in their plant in Lansing, Michigan.

[Clipping from New York Post, January 8]

Embattled financier Mr Richard Werther passed away in a car wreck not far from his vacation home in upstate New York yesterday. According to police reports, Mr Werther appears to have been driving alone on a scenic highway late at night, when he appears to have lost control on a patch of ice. The car appears to have skidded out of control and crashed into nearby trees and an embankment. Police reconstruction of the accident indicates that speeding may have played a role in the fatality; they were not able to state whether drugs or alcohol were involved, as the medical examiner's states it will be two weeks before test results are returned. In the early hours of this morning, a passing motorist saw the crashed

car and called authorities. Unfortunately, Mr Werther was reported dead on scene, and resuscitation attempts were unsuccessful. Please see Obituaries for information on Mr Werther's funeral arrangements.

Chapter 20

Tony ends up in a strip joint one night. Military defense contracts being what they are, Tony's entertaining with Obie and a bunch of no-neck beefcake assholes. The girls are gyrating over stages and on top of the drinks tables. Tony offers a bunch of them some cash just so they'll hang out at his table. Tony likes having a maximum buffer zone between himself and all these drunks idiots.

Not that Tony is exactly sober, either.

Obie shoots him a frustrated look, which is just a beautiful bonus.

Tony leans into one of the girls in his lap and asks her, "Honey, how much would it cost to take you and a few of your closest friends someplace a little quieter, where I can enjoy your company properly?"

She murmurs some number in his ear, but Tony's not really paying attention. He can afford it. He slips his arms around a few more of them on his way out. How many strippers can you fit in a limo, anyway?

Tony aims to find out.

He takes them to a fancy French restaurant his mom liked. The look on the maître d's face is perfect.

Tony slides his glasses down his nose and asks if they can get him a corner table.

Of course, Na Stark.

Tony orders two or three of everything, because why the fuck not, he's paying. It's a surprisingly cordial meal. He doesn't eat much these days, but the girls all have a great time. When they like something Tony just waves the extra-attentive waiter over and tips his head at whatever they're eating and second servings arrive like magic.

Tony adds some champagne, because hey, everybody likes champagne, right? Tony doesn't, especially, but what the hell. When desserts are demolished, Tony is almost kind of sorry this is going to end. He could take them home, but then one of them, a girl with olive-dark skin and an ass-length white wig (Tony thinks her name's maybe Bebe or Baby or Bambi) starts complaining to her friend Honey about the dire noise her car is making and what utter pigs the mechanics have been about it.

Tony's listening with half an ear to the conversation on his right (best way to blow an old guy, handjob first or no, it's kind of fascinating) but he focuses in on the car discussion. "Jesus," he says, "your mechanics are an insult to automobile-kind. I can't listen to any more of this. I'll fix it for free."

Bebe (or Bambi?) has had quite a lot of top quality three hundred bucks a bottle champagne, so she says sure, Tony can look at her piece of shit Camry.

Tony calls a second limo to drive home the girls (and one sweet faced boy--where did he even come from? huh, well, whatever) who live across the city. Then he takes his little gaggle of strippers in their teeny dresses and improbable wigs and teetery but gorgeous heels to his own limo. They all get into a long talk about blowing guys this time. Tony's kind of amazed to discover he's got views on the topic, and he gets just as heated about it as Bebe and Honey.

When they pile into Bebe's tiny house in Queens, everybody decides to open the bottles of champagne that Tony ordered to go. They sit on an orange ratty couch or sprawl on the floor, while the TV flickers in the background, sound off. Rose puts on some music, and Tony sprawls on the floor, too, more comfortable than he's been in ages, although some of that has got to be the booze.

But when everyone falls off to sleep one by one, Tony dozes, too. He'll hear it from Obie or Pepper or whatever, but honestly, it's nice to get away from it all for a while.

The light of dawn starts creeping across the sky.

Tony gets up (is he still drunk? apparently so, but he can walk well enough for government work) so he staggers out to the pitiful garage to resuscitate the elderly Camry. It's beigey-silver, rusted, and indeed, as Bebe had said, a real piece of shit. Under the hood is a decent enough engine, though, Tony's sure of it.

He has to make do with some truly shitty socket wrenches and he doesn't even have a way to put the fucker up on blocks. He ends up using an elderly tire jack and a few prayers, but by the time he's done fixing the mess the assholes at Ray's Autobody made, Tony feels oddly better.

It's well and truly light by the time he staggers into the house's tiny kitchen. His shirt is a dead loss, and he's only wearing his undershirt. His silk suit pants are stained with grease and what Tony's afraid is probably general garage grunge--sticky, brown, and scary. His tie was lost long ago--stolen by one of the stripper or given to somebody else.

There's a sound behind him, and Tony turns.

A young man in a convenience store uniform is blinking at him, obviously just back from a late night shift.

"Oh, hey, sorry," Tony tells him, because he's sobered up enough to realize that standing in a stranger's kitchen probably does look a little weird. "I came over with, you know," he waves vaguely.

"Bebe and them," the guy says, yawning. "You want some leftover pizza?"

"Sure," Tony says, because why the hell not.

It's cold leftovers from work, but the guy tells him he gets to take it home. Perk of the job and all.

Tony tells him that he's fixing Bebe's piece of shit Camry, and the guy (Kevin) tells him that he could probably get Tony a bit of work under the table if he's not too fussy about how much he gets paid.

Tony stares at Kevin. They're both leaning on a rickety table, covered in past-due bills and Chinese delivery ads. It's taking Tony a second to figure out that Kevin thinks he's some kind of.... Tony's mind just shorts out here, since he's not dressed like a stripper. Hooker? No, he can't be. But wait, just because he's dressed in nice clothes doesn't mean he has money. Kevin has no idea that Tony's limo is what dropped them off.

Mistress, Tony guesses. Piece on the side. The sort of piece on the side whose patron buys him pretty suits and of course hangs with strippers. And that Kevin call me Kev thinks Tony's doing it because he's having a hard time finding work as a mechanic.

No one in Tony's life has ever just assumed he could fix a car before, and they sure as hell haven't been desperate (or maybe just drunk) enough to let him have a go. Yeah, sure, Obie lets him work on weapons specs and designs, but it's not real, and he has to hide it, and Obie doesn't let him in Stark headquarters doing that, and, and--Kevin is looking at him, oddly hopeful.

"Sure," Tony says, voice hoarse. "I could do that."

Great, Kevin tells him. He knows a guy whose crappy Civic is about two steps from death and a pizza delivery guy who's driving a beat up Kia. Tony winces, and Kevin says, "I know, right?"

Tony tells him that if the guy can't pay cash, Tony'll do it for a six pack of beer.

*

Which is how Tony ends up getting a couple lifts installed in his warehouse bay. He's under the Kia, and oh my god, this car, it is killing him, this engine is terrible, what were they thinking?

And Obie's shoes appear in his vision, and Tony thinks, *Fuck, busted*, before Pepper's traitorous heels click into view.

Tony slides out from under the car to stare up at them both in exasperation. It's his fucking spare time, isn't it? "What?"

"Oh Tony," Pepper says, and he winces. He hates that worried voice, and he's still got a hangover two days later. Jesus, keep it down, Pep.

"My boy, where have you been?" Obie demands.

"Working," Tony says, and he slides back under the car, hoping to get away with it.

Obie just crouches down. "You disappeared with a lot of, well, Tony you have to understand we were understandably worried."

"Well, turns out I was fine, right?" Tony has got to get that AI installed that he can talk to about letting different people in and out at different times. Normally, he's fine having Pepper in this workshop, but not if she's going to just yell at him. He hasn't even done anything.

"Do you have any idea how much the bill was for your dinner?" Obie asks.

"*Working*," Tony says loudly, because who the fuck cares how much dinner cost? He can afford it. But he's also kind of pissed, because seriously, if he wants to treat a couple strippers to a decent meal for a change, he damn well ought to be able to.

"Tony," Obie says loudly. "Tony, we didn't even get the Carmichael account. You were supposed to help."

Tony slides out from the under the car, because he cannot concentrate on these fucking fuel lines when he's being nagged like this. It's nothing to do with the edge of unease that Obie's stern voice and 'behave' pheromones are causing. "Look, Carmichael is a dipshit. He's overcharging on costs, he has a crappy warehousing system, he'll be late, and he has shitty taste in booze." Plus, he tried to stick his fingers under Bebe's g-string.

"Tony, Carmichael was the best of the bids," Pepper says, appearing in his vision.

"Get some more bids then, Jesus Christ, do I have to do everything around here?"

Obie throws his hands up in the air. "It took me three months to get Carmichael to make a bid that good, Tony. Work with me here. If you can't focus on the entertaining, then focus on the designs."

Tony glares at him, because what do they think he's been doing?

"This car business, Tony," Obie says, voice way too loud. "I may not be your father, but even I can tell the difference between a subcompact up on blocks and a *rocket launcher*."

"You'll have it Friday." Tony wipes his hands on a rag. "Both of you, get out."

"Tony," Pepper says, but he ignores her. She let Obadiah find out where his house is. It's a betrayal.

When she steps closer, Tony goes to the stereo and flips it on. Rock screams out of the speakers, and she retreats with Obie, the two of them sharing worried looks.

*

Tony delivers the weapons design Obie wanted by the promised Friday.

Friday night, Tony goes club hopping. If he picks up some more strippers and a few pros, well, fuck them all.

He can do what he wants.

*

It gets to be a bit of a thing, after a while.

Tony works on Stark tech weaponry by day, and he sees Rhodey when he can, and he does his best to avoid the hell out of Obie, and when he's burned out and exhausted, he picks up strippers or hookers or just random people he meets in clubs or bars or strip joints.

Often, several of them at a time.

Mostly women, because he's charming, and he smells mostly safe, and if anyone has qualms, he just moves on to somebody else who *is* happy to sit in his lap and argue about movies and drink overpriced champagne.

If Tony tarts up too much, he sometimes gets exciting offers of his own, and one hilarious evening he blows some guy in the back bathroom, and when he's done, the guy slips two twenties in his hand.

Tony's deportment lessons (or maybe the booze) keep him from laughing hysterically.

For some reason that Tony doesn't think too much about, he sticks the twenties in his keepsake box.

*

Sometimes, like with Bebe and Honey (who've switched to a nicer strip club that Tony visits from time to time), he'll wind up on somebody's floor, or couch, and he starts carrying tools in his limo in case he has to get to work immediately on a busted AC unit or a microwave, and he slides under cars in his suits (whether his customers have got fifty bucks or the six pack of beer, he doesn't really care, it's just for form's sake), and doesn't see why the hell anyone else cares if sometimes his dates steal the cash he keeps in his wallet.

"That's what it's there for," Tony tells Dr Katz, who is looking like he's giving her a headache.

"What about your credit cards?"

"Pepper handles that." Usually with tight lips and stern frowns, but it's less bad ever since Tony wrote a simple program for tracking his purchases. It's easy to flag extra purchases and stop future spending if he feels like he must (and he doesn't always).

"Does it bother you that people are stealing money from you?"

Tony sprawls in his chair. "No, why should it? I've got plenty."

"Do you think--" Dr Katz isn't the most tactful doctor in the world, so this is going to be good. "Do you think it's a fair exchange?"

He gives her a blinding smile. *Finally*, someone who gets it. "Sure."

"I don't think you're so socially inept that people need to be paid to spend time with you."

"I'm not socially inept," because he isn't. "I just get tired of putting on the charm. It's nice to just let go."

"Be who you are."

"Exactly. But capitalism's capitalism. Supply and demand, exchange of goods for services. That's how it works."

She sighs, and Tony steals the clock from her desk so he can fix it. The slightly off-beat tick drives him crazy.

*

Tony's at a more downscale bar this time, which means the restaurant only has one Michelin Star instead of three.

"No, see," Tony tells Diamond, one of his dates. "I have finally figured it out. Sex is simple. Look, you know how in an equation, there's different letters, like a and b and y?"

She's frowning, but she's tracking this, Tony can just tell. "I guess," Diamond says.

"So, it's simple. Each trick is different. All you have to do is figure out what their variables are. Like, one dude's into pain and mouth gags, right, but he also likes..." Tony trails off.

"Butt fucking," Diamond suggests. "Mouth gag guys are always into butt fucking. Especially with big dildos, for some reason. It's like peppermint and cinnamon are Christmas flavors."

That makes perfect sense to Tony, which probably means he should cut back on the bourbon, but whatever, "Right, so, mouth gag is A and pain is B and big dildo in the butt is C and all you have to do is solve for X where X equals lots and lots of orgasms. Or only one, if you're feeling mean."

"Or they're cheap," Diamond suggests. "Or haven't wiped their butt after they go to the bathroom."

Tony's kind of thrown by that, but his expression makes her laugh. "Or that," he agrees. "Right."

Tony decides that his theory makes sex so much simpler. All you have to do is figure out exactly what that person's variables are and in what combination you need to apply them and then, hey presto, lots of orgasms.

It makes sense to the hookers, but it makes Pepper look so sad that Tony never brings it up again.

Tony uses it to successfully fuck his way to his first Sexiest Plaything Alive award (complete with near-nude photo shoot) so that just goes to show what Pepper knows, so there.

*

In between fucking around and inventing things that kill people and playing with Rhodey (for an enlisted man, he's never even been to a strip joint, how is that even possible), Tony spends an awful lot of time fighting with Obie.

"My boy," Obie says, and again with the huge motherfucking paw on his shoulder. Tony hates it, hates being loomed at, but Obie is the last tie he has to any blood relative ever, so he lets it happen. "You're always looking for perfection. I'm looking for profits. This is a business, not a charity."

(Obie really disapproves of Tony's cheap car fixing habit. Tony wishes he would just fucking give it a damn rest.)

"I'm not looking for perfection," Tony insists. He slams the H35 on the workbench of his office at Stark Headquarters. "This fucking thing pulls to the right 6 degrees over 35% of the time!"

"Tony." Obie slides his arm around Tony's shoulder, and Tony braces himself not to pull away. "It's within acceptable parameters. The fix you've designed is beautiful. I'm sure any scientist would be proud." Except your dad goes unsaid, because Howard would never have let it get that bad.

"Acceptable parameters are not--"

"*Tony*." Obie tugs him against his chest. "Our contracts stipulate the parameters, you know that. The Army is happy. You can be happy, too."

"I've got a fix," Tony insists. The parts just need to be machined properly, for Christ's sake. This isn't rocket science, it's just a damn gun. But if the gun does not aim right, people die.

"Your fix is lovely," Obie says again. "But it would cost us over 3.2 million dollars, and that's just for one gun."

Tony pulls away at last. He goes to the window, stares out, thinks about Rhodey showing him how to fire the damn thing. Thinks about the soldier Rhodey took him to meet who's just back from a tour, not quite whole. He doesn't answer.

Obie takes it for acceptance and finally leaves.

*

Tony kind of still hanging out with Honey, who's a working girl, but who's been pretty good at finding him decent side jobs.

It's Saturday afternoon around 4pm, and Honey's going to have to get ready for work soon.

Tony's stretched out on her couch with her toddler River sleeping on his chest. Tony's been pressed into babysitting duty, again. He's not sure how it happened, but it's become kind of a regular thing.

Honey works long hours, mostly nights, and it's not like Tony's got anything better to do than watch over a small kid who puts absolutely everything into her mouth all the time. He's only doing it temporarily, because he met one of Honey's friends (Tish) who was filling in for one night if Honey couldn't find anybody else and Tony found himself offering himself out of sheer horror. He wouldn't let Tish near a dead rat, much less a toddler, and fucking three years of college-level early childhood education classes ought to count for something.

The babysitting seems to kind of keep happening, though, and Tony's more or less accepting of it. Honey keeps his preferred beer in the frig and she'll make him breakfast before he leaves in the morning (since she's just getting in) and that seems enough for both of them.

Plus, River's kind of restful.

Tony's got her on his chest at the moment, where she's drooling on his band tee shirt, and his feet are in Honey's lap. She's lighting a menthol and drinking a beer while they watch crappy afternoon Nickelodeon, because that's got less swearing for River's delicate ears. Not that Tony and Honey don't swear enough for a couple of sailors.

"So I know this guy," Honey says, and Tony groans, because that's how it always starts. So I know this guy with a boat that needs fixing. So I know a guy who wants to know how to launder gambling money. So I know a guy who needs his attic fan fixed. So I know a guy whose automatic gas fireplace isn't working (never again, Tony swears to god, because that had been goddamn raccoons in the chimney, and no).

"Is this suitable for impressionable ears?" Tony asks, because sometimes it really isn't. Honey's found him a few lady friends for Rhodey, a few pros who might like to help Tony through a heat or two (he's never taken her up on the intros, but maybe).

She just smacks his foot with her elbow. Ow. She doesn't have her warpaint on yet, and her hair is soft and brown, cut almost in a buzz cut like many of the people Tony seems to know. It makes the wigs a lot easier. She looks really young in the soft afternoon light coming through the windows.

He rubs his foot against her belly absently. "Tell me," he says.

Honey gives him a look, sips her beer. "You dating or something? Because that's a hell of a shiner."

Tony narrows his eyes. This is off limits and she knows it, especially when he's got her daughter on his chest. "No. Men are pigs."

"Too right they are. Even working girls have muscle."

"If you know a guy who's muscle, I'm not interested," Tony tells her. God, he keeps having this conversation. He can take care of himself, the bodyguards never let him do anything.

Obie harps on it constantly, and the one time Tony gave in, they'd reported exactly what he'd done, who he'd done, where he'd gone, everything. The drivers are nearly as bad, but at least they don't follow him inside.

Honey takes a long drag on her cigarette, blows out smoke through her nose. "They got pretty rough, for not-a-date."

Tony just grunts. It was at a social shindig, high class, but there are some things even Tony won't do.

"Anyway. This guy I know isn't exactly about that."

She doesn't say what it is exactly about, so Tony steals her beer, takes a long swallow. River's holding him down, and while he could get up and get his own, keeping her asleep is The Prime Directive here.

"I think you should learn to drive."

"Yeah, so do I." You make one mistake oversouping a car and test it yourself in a parking lot and suddenly everyone's a critic. One time. *One.* Suddenly nobody's willing to let you near their ancient American beater. Fucking unfair.

"This guy I know, he could do that," Honey says.

"What's the catch?" Tony asks warily, because there is always a catch.

Honey steals her beer back. "You're gonna hafta buy the car."

Tony thinks about it. "I guess I could live with that."

*

When Tony meets Honey's guy ("he's named Happy, you'll *like him,* Tony I swear, look, he needs a job"), he's impressed. Fucking bitch played him but good.

Happy is six feet of muscle if Tony's ever seen it. Tony just sighs, sticks out his hand, does the intro thing.

The first car Tony buys to learn on doesn't exactly make it out intact, but he fixes it back to rights, so people should fucking stop complaining.

If Happy insists on teaching him some self-defense moves to feel useful for the new salary he's pulling down, well, Tony's going to let him. Why the hell not.

*

Chapter 21

For the next few years, Tony finds himself doing a lot of ugly math.

Invent a new machining system to improve accuracy of all new machined parts (including guns), cost 4.8 mill for all his factories; invent a new polymer, personal patent income (net because he can't get away with gross) 1.2 mill; fuck his way to a discounted ore source, income .9 mill; invent a new missile guidance system bought by all the NATO countries, net 2 mill and change; fuck his way to a serious government kickback (sticking a new high-tech StarkTech plant in fucking Iowa are they nuts), 1.7 mill. Not quite enough to cover all the costs of fixing H35 production, but enough to get Obie to fucking shut up about the way Tony just pushed it through with the board.

Pepper's not against Tony's math fetish, but she's not always happy about the things he puts in the income and outgo columns.

They fight about it, and one night, way too drunk, Tony hurls a bottle of single malt across the room. It smashes against a new painting she'd just had hung, breaking the protective glass.

Pepper's eyes go tight and hard. She's on the other side of the room. Tony did not throw it at her. He knows she's going to fucking yell at him about it, but he is so angry.

She is, too. "Tony, you don't have to do this!"

"It's my fucking choice!" His dress shirt's open, tie hanging loose, and he doesn't even remember what he was doing three hours ago.

Pepper sets her jaw. "It's the wrong choice, Tony."

Tony slams himself into the couch. "Everything I do is."

She comes over then, crouches down in her too-high heels, hand on one of his knees. Tony sees lipstick stains on his pants, wonders how they got there, knows he won't remember. "Tony, you're a good person. I'm not saying that you shouldn't care about the work. I get that this is the family business, but it's like you're throwing yourself on a grenade to fix something you didn't even break."

He stares at the wall. "You know what my dad wanted, for me?"

"What?" Pepper's voice is soft, but she also almost sounds eager. He never talks about his family.

"He was hooking me up with Obie." Tony feels around the edge of the couch, finds a bottle of bourbon he hasn't smashed.

"Tony," she says slowly, "are you sure?"

"Yup." He drinks, a long slow pull, feels the burn all the way down his throat. "Mom had other plans. Some mathematician out in London. Nice guy, actually. Should have done him when I had the chance. Anyway. Dad."

Pepper's hand doesn't move, but her eyes are intent. "Did he do something, Tony?"

"I'm a certified genius. Did you know that?"

"I figured it out," she says wryly.

Good ole Pepper. "One of my teachers had me tested. Years ago. I'm off the charts. All I wanted was to build things. I'm good at it."

"Yes," Pepper says quietly. "You are."

"I need you to let me." His voice is quiet, but his hand is shaking.

Pepper looks down at her own hand on his knee. "OK, Tony."

Tony takes another long drink of booze. Maybe it'll help. "I'm getting you into Wharton."

Because Pepper is Pepper, she doesn't say what the fuck. She says, "Is there a reason you want to send me to the best MBA program in the country?"

"Some people think Harvard's better."

"*Tony*."

He smiles. Pepper's always fun to rile. She never lets him get away with anything. "Yes, there's a reason. You know I can't take over the company myself. Department of Defense."

"Yes, I know." Her voice isn't even sad, just intent now, wary.

"I have controlling share of the stock." He's got a tie hanging on his neck, but is it his? It's dark blue. His shirt is dark red silk. Well, maybe. He tosses it to the side, runs a hand over his hair.

"Tony, are you *serious*?"

He looks at her. He's drunk, yes, but he's thought about this for a long time. He can't find any other way out. "We could get married. That would make it easier."

"I'm not marrying you, Tony. Quit kidding and get a grip."

Tony hadn't been kidding. The will's nice and clear; all assets to his spouse. Simple. It would be a huge risk, but she's the best he'll likely ever get. Sure, he doesn't think they'd be compatible in bed, but he can get literally anyone off. "I'd make it worth your while."

His hand trails over her cheek. Pepper's eyes soften. He can smell her arousal. She doesn't like it when he does this, when he turns his body on her, but it still works. He leans in for a long kiss, just submissive enough to get her to take over, but not as submissive as he'd be if he was himself.

Her hands are in his hair and she's responding, and he can smell the heady bright meadow-sweet scent of her and he wonders vaguely if she'll make him fuck her, and he thinks he probably has enough of Tom's pills to make it happen. It'll be fine.

And then Pepper's pulling back. Hands on his jaw, holding him still.

He looks at her with sleepy eyes, lets her smell his own desire. Tony can do this, it's easy to get aroused if you think about the right things, focus properly, on her eyebrows and her frown and her smile.

"*No*, Tony," she says sternly.

He tips his head back and bares his throat, because wow, this could be fun. He's always loved the way she bosses him around, this could definitely work.

"*Tony*."

Fuck. That's the kind-of-hurt voice. Yes, fine, he enjoys riling her, but Tony wouldn't hurt Pepper for the world. He ducks his head.

"No," she says more gently. "I'll go to Wharton and I'll run your company and I'll fix your messes, but I won't marry you. You'd make me a terrible husband, Tony Stark."

He rubs his beard against her small hand, fond. Like he can actually argue that point.

"But you'll make *someone* a lovely husband. Don't sell yourself short, OK?"

"I know my exact worth to the penny."

Pepper takes him by the shoulders and gives him a little shake. "Come on, bed now. We'll talk more tomorrow."

They don't, though.

Tony's got an early flight. Meetings across the country, then a demonstration in Afghanistan that's going to add a whole lot of digits to his ugly math spreadsheet.

*

When Tony wakes up in a cave, his heart is sore and his body is nearly shut down. His mind keeps skittering around, the way it does when he's in a flashback, but this is all a little too real for that.

The fucking car battery attached to his chest isn't even the worst part.

The worst part is having to hold onto consciousness enough to hold onto the damn thing when he's being thrust face down into a pool of muddy water, choking and gagging and struggling.

It's all way too familiar, if not in method, then in madness.

*

Tony plays batgammon with Yinsen, drinks tea. It's a heavy subject, unspoken between them. Tony's not in heat, but if he keeps getting better, he will be eventually.

He'd really rather die than have that happen.

The reactor, when he gets it installed, makes his body feel jittery in a way that he knows isn't quite right, and Tony knows he's stalled his heats a little.

Maybe.

Please god.

Even if the heats don't come, he's alone here, because it's not like Yinsen can stop all the guys with guns. There won't be a damn thing Tony can do about it if they decide to change up the torture menu one afternoon, out of boredom, out of malice, won't matter.

He has to get out of here.

*

Killing people with the suit is a lot easier than Tony thinks it should be.

*

When he gets back to the states, he cockblocks Obie at the press conference, scares the hell out of Pepper, sends a message to his accountants to make sure River's got a college fund big enough to attend the most expensive universities in the world through a full doctorate. Happy gets him cheeseburgers, and Rhodey tells him to take some time.

After spending the first couple nights in the public-focused penthouse on Central Park, where it's easier to have parties, Tony comes back to Stark House.

He climbs into the central hidden elevator, the one that answers only to Jarvis.

It lets him out into his private bedroom, the one Pepper's never seen, the one that's a mattress on the floor under a pile of blankets, tech everywhere, reinforced beams and concrete and rebar, warm and solid and rigged to blow.

Curled in the blankets is Na Anderson.

Tony sits down next to her, yanks off his tie. She's wearing a battered Nirvana shirt and a pair of his sweatpants, thick wool socks. It's cold up here, because he doesn't have it set up to

the house's air system; it runs on its own, but it's a lot colder because he has to hide any heat sources.

She sits up, looks at him. He kicks off his dress shoes, throws the arm brace across the room. He's sure she can smell the blood on him--and the booze.

"Your tracker went offline," she says.

Tony gives in and hugs himself to his knees. "Under a mountain. Bad satellite reception."

Her arms come around him, and she draws him close against her chest. "Don't ever fucking do that again."

He turns and buries his face against her old shirt. He's shaking, and he doesn't care, because she knows all his secrets. She keeps up a murmur into his hair. I missed you. I love you. You're safe now. Don't do that again.

*

Tony doesn't let her know about the suit, because he's not ready to talk about it. When she wants to shoot his thigh with a new tracking device, he lets her.

If Na Anderson finds it odd that he goes to Dubai and then Gulmira, she doesn't say.

*

When shit goes down with Obie, Tony's mostly surprised at how much he's surprised. He thought he'd hit the maximum paranoia point, but apparently not.

Pepper's upset about Obie's betrayals, later, but Na Anderson is not. Or, she just looks for a long time at the deep-rock wall of her lowest level workshop. Her hand tightens on her welding torch until her knuckles go white, her lips go pale and hard.

Her shoulders are a tense line. Tony's not sure what it means. When her head dips down, her hair falls over her eyes. She looks--tired. Ashamed. Sorry.

He wonders if she blames herself. She'd never liked Obie, but she'd also never pushed it. That would be stupid, so probably not, because she's the smartest person he's ever met.

"Hey," Tony says. "I'm thinking for my upcoming birthday party, we should have some fucking fireworks. Light up the sky. Write my name in lights over the whole of New York. What do you think?"

She pulls away from whatever her inner thought is, looks over at him. "I think we can make that happen. Might need to play with some new chemicals to get the colors just right."

"I'll have Jarvis put in some orders. Get us rolling."

Chapter 22

To Tony, the palladium poisoning feels like karma.

*

The problem with Obie's death, besides, you know, losing the last official family guardian Tony will ever have, is that Tony was—is—still the heir to the Stark fortune. The heir to vast wealth, yes, but also the heir to the single greatest arms production company in the Western World.

Last year, pre-Afghanistan, Tony received a handful of improbable and overly personal marriage offers. Mostly would-be lovers in lust with Tony's ass.

The official offers, the people who wanted to marry into the Stark estate, who wanted to acquire majority voting rights in SI, who wanted to control the finest weapons engineering mind of the current generation…. Those people all went through Obie.

As horrible as Obie had been, as controlling, as sneaky, as overbearing?

At least the man had been possessive and paranoid and thereby determined that the only ones who should get near his best friend's son was himself.

Knocking back drinks at the Washington DC Renewable Energy Conference, Tony had to admit that Obie's wardship had come in handy, occasionally.

The woman currently chatting him up was beautiful. Long brunette waves cascaded down her shoulders to caress the tips of her large curved breasts. Her lips were full, her waist was tiny, and she was oozing closer like Tony was a bird and she was the cat who wanted to devour him whole.

Her name was Taylor Madison, call me Tay, and Tony was quite certain she was the Army's latest attempt to get him to make weapons again.

"Naturally, the Marines have long believed that effective warfare includes reduced reliance on fossil fuels," Tony says, just to wind her up.

Tony watches her eyes flash with fire, but Taylor (supposedly a rep for GreenWorks) only says, "Yes, so I've heard. But Tony, darling, I bet you'd love another glass of champagne."

She plucks one off a passing tray and offers it to him.

Tony smiles grimly. "Not my vintage, sweetheart." How stupid do they think he is?

Very, obviously. Miss Taylor Madison sways closer. "Then dance with me." Her heavy breasts brush his arm, and her voice is deep with command.

Tony sets his (hopefully undrugged but he's not risking it) scotch on a tray for a waiter. "Ensign or Lieutant?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Gotta be one or the other. The brass picked you based on looks, but they wouldn't have given the assignment to a NCO. Too risky. You've got to be from good family, educated, and, I would guess, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for your country."

Taylor flutters her lashes at him. "Who says sleeping with you would be a sacrifice?"

"Once you've deflowered and bonded me are you supposed to use your wifely influence to get me to make weapons again? Or is this about the Iron Man armor?"

Tony's leaning casually against a polished railing at the conference's big reception hall. Her face gives nothing away, but in the mirror behind her, Tony can see her spine straighten subtly into parade rest at the words Iron man. "Ah."

"You're mistaken," Taylor says quickly.

Now that Tony's knows her goal, he can dismiss her. Tony doesn't bother with goodbyes. He just turns and walks away. This conference was a bad idea anyway.

*

Getting snatched from the jaws of death teaches you a lot about people. Mostly, it teaches you how many are kind of disappointed you're back. Or they feel they now get to bitch about who you've decided to become.

Or whatever.

The point is: nearly dying is a *catalyst*. It changes the people around you, often showing you things you wished you didn't know (Obie Obie Obie).

Tony knows he's dying. It's his fucking life, and his last goddamn moments.

Why can't he have them with the people he loves? Make certain those people are taken care of? Make certain that his life's work goes to where it should go, instead of being used for, well, evil?

*

By the end of the first six months as Iron Man, Tony has a small stable of lawyers who do nothing but write 'not interested' replies to marriage offers.

Tony eventually sleeps with a few of the faction-representatives in an attempt to rile them up against each other. The CIA's 'marry Tony' rep and the Air Force's 'marry Tony' rep get into a fist fight at a society do. The State Department's rep and the rep from UAI end up accidental best friends. And the FBI rep, the Hammer rep, and the Rand Corporation rep all end up in a widely publicized (but very funny) sex scandal broken by TMZ.

Tony sends all of the participants a commemorative 'I tried to Marry Tony Stark' tour tee shirt (complete with accurate dates and cities), and that, oddly enough, does seem to embarrass most of the groups into knocking it off.

At least for the time being.

*

Tony uses his vast fortune and resources to create the largest science fair the world has ever seen. He wants to show off the projects that some smart omega kid at a school built, show off the project that a researcher at a state college built, show off a water purification plant that a small engineering firm created. Those projects would vanish into the maws of corporate patent law, in the general scheme of things, or obscurity.

With Tony's name on them, they'll shine, the makers will get paid, the manufacturers will insist on mass-producing them. It's a little like playing scientific Santa Claus.

But.

He has to be careful. He wants to play Santa Claus, but he absolutely cannot let anyone know he's dying. They'll….change.

Tony has to know the last words of the people he loves are the truth, even if the truth is 'Tony, you're such an asshole.'

So, he shows up with cheerleaders and shows off the suit and creates the biggest egofest he can.

*

As it turns out, Tony's plan is not genius-level thinking.

*

His plan to drive the car in Monaco turns out less horrible than it could have. At least Vanko attacks him, not the poor Stark driver. But he really wishes that Pepper had said yes to Venice. Well, she didn't, because she's honorable and responsible.

So, Tony blows the shit out of the Central Park West penthouse during his birthday party (it's the place Obie picked, so it's not such a loss), flies off in his suit, and Rhodey, being Rhodey, grabs the other suit to chase him down. Which works great, if by great you mean smashing a new skylight into one of Tony's Stark House workshops.

Getting chained to the house by Nick Fury's lapdog Coulson is not the worst possible thing to have happened. It sucks, yes, and Tony's head hurts like fucking fire, but….compared to having Pepper kick him out of her office?

Yeah, Nick's guy isn't so bad.

Tony is scrabbling around under a bench, looking for the spare stud-finder before he smashes the shit out of any more walls. It's in this last tool box, has to be.

Jarvis continues to show the many security feeds of the various house rooms and entrances, even though Tony isn't watching them. Suddenly, one of the screens enlarges and Tony can hear everything from the front living room in beautiful stereo sound.

Small feet in workboots, crunching over safety glass.

Coulson's voice. "Na, I'm afraid you're not authorized to be here."

There's the sudden blare of a tinny ring tone. "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap."

Tony's head goes up so fast he knocks it on the top of the desk. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Ow.

"Na, I'm sorry, I'll—" Coulson's voice stops dead.

Tony scrambles out from under the desk as quickly as he can. It's not fast enough.

"That's the first," he hears her say. "For each thirty point one four second delay in letting me see him whole and unharmed, another threat will be sent to your phone. You should be aware, before taking any action, that I have installed a fail-safe. If you do harm to Anthony Stark, or to me, this failsafe will activate and the files you see on your phone will appear in the inboxes of the editors of each of the world's most influential newspapers. And TMZ."

Tony bolts for the elevator. "Jarvis, tell her to stop! Run protocol Zulu Tango Zuly Five Nine Seven Five."

"Where did you acquire these classified documents?" Coulson's voice, smooth as ever. Unflappable.

Thank god. Jarvis is slapping a holo of the living room, with voice feed, onto each upcoming glass surface as Tony runs. So far, only Coulson can be seen, but there's a faint sheen of sweat on his temple.

Na Anderson knows exactly where the cameras are placed.

"I'm not at liberty to say. You'll find, ah." She breaks off as Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap rings again.

"What is this? Is this some kind of joke?" Coulson sounds surprised.

"Not at all. If you cease holding him hostage, not only will I destroy the threat documents, but as you can see, I am very willing to make it worth your while."

Tony knows Jarvis is in control of the elevator. He frantically pushes the button anyway. "Zulu Tango Zulu, Jarvis! Why isn't it working?"

"Na Anderson has accessed your private server, sir, and I regret to inform you, she is using her medical override. As you are in fact in immediate peril, I am not able to implement Zulu

Tango Zulu at this time."

Tony makes an undignified teeth-gnashing noise. "At least tell Fury's guy to not shoot her! For fuck's sake, Jarvis!"

But oddly, when Tony stumbles out into the living room, Na Anderson and Coulson are both staring at his phone in apparent amity.

"You see here," she's saying. "And here."

"And it will work?" he's asking.

"Yes. All patents to your, er, government agency of choice." Then she hears him and turns.

Tony stops his mad dash, skidding in glass and bits of concerete. "I can explain."

Her eyes are sharp, and they take him in from the top of his head to the scuffed boots. Her jaw sets and she returns to Coulson. "So, do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal." He offers a hand, she shakes it. "He's all yours." Coulson seems amused.

"You can't hurt her," Tony says, suddenly afraid. These are government agents. What if they made her disappear? "Na Anderson, what is going on?"

She just hands Coulson his phone and picks her way through the rubble. "I had to find out through a Google alert."

"Find out what?" Tony asks, thrown.

"That's you're—oh my god, I can't even say it. You exploded your own house! You got attacked by some guy in Monaco! You gave away all your art! Did you think I was stupid?"

Coulson's leaving like he's thoroughly glad Tony isn't his mess anymore.

"I—well, it might not be, you know, you never know," Tony says.

She picks up a large (very expensive) vase and hurls it at the wall where it shatters. "You have a chunk of palladium in your chest. No wonder you wouldn't let me examine your arc reactor. You pretended you were a selfish immature little boy obsessed with having his own glory so I couldn't examine it in situ. God, I am so fucking stupid."

"What? No! It wasn't like that!"

"It was exactly like that!" She grabs her hair in both hands and tugs hard. "OK. I promised myself not to do this."

"Promised not to do what?" Tony asks warily.

“Yell. Tony. I care about you. What was going on in your head that you wouldn’t come to me?”

Tony sits down abruptly, head in his hands. “I just—everyone changed.”

“Honey.” She comes over and sits beside him. “Is this about Pepper?”

“What? No! She’s fine!”

“Did she accept taking control of Stark?” Na Anderson asks gently.

“Yes of course.” Tony stares at her, confused.

“And Rhodey took your suit, right?”

“Not my suit, but *a* suit.”

“OK,” she says, still gentle. “Honey. I care about you. We are going to fix this.”

Tony fidgets. “I figured it out. Dad left some notes. Well, this weird cryptic video sculpture clue thing.”

“Yes. I know.”

“Wait? How?”

“Because when you *blew up your penthouse via birthday party*, I hacked your private server,” she says patiently. “And when I found enough to prove my hunch that you were *dying*, I used my medical override to get Jarvis to spill the beans.”

“Oh,” Tony says. He should not feel sulky about this. Like a kid caught playing hooky or doing something wrong. “I’m going to make a particle accelerator. Do the new element.”

Na Anderson slides her arm around his shoulders, hugs him close. “Honey. I love you. But you have got to stop doing everything the hard way. I have delicate nerves.”

And to Tony’s surprise, she drops two pieces of metal into his hands.

Tony stares down at them. It’s the cufflinks his mother gave him, all those years ago. “I threw these out.”

Na Anderson just snorts. “Tony, I’ve been a floor mother for decades. I know when a kid throws out a priceless family relic. Sometimes I set them aside in case the child changes their mind, or in case the child needs to burn the relic in effigy, or pawn it, or just made a mistake. If they want it to remain gone, I make sure it’s destroyed properly and safely.”

Tony turns the cufflinks, sniffing, then carefully tasting. “But, this isn’t—“

“No. They’ve coated in a simple but, it being your father, nearly priceless vibranium and gold alloy. But the center, I’m sure is the element you need.”

Tony rolls them over in his hand. "I'm not sure whether I want something of dad's inside me."

"In that case, we build the particle accelerator."

"We," Tony repeats, staring at the cool metal. "I thought you were mad at me."

"Tony. I will never, ever be so mad at you that I will not want to help you build something. Don't be an idiot."

He relaxes, just a little, and leans against her shoulder. "I can't believe you threatened the rent-a-goon."

Her arm tightens. "Baby, I would do a lot worse than threaten."

*

*

The best part of blowing up Vanko and fucking over Hammer and giving every last fucking stupid United States Senator the finger is—

Coming home to find that Honey's daughter River drew a picture of him. Not the Iron Man suit. Not the great Tony Stark.

Nope.

The picture is of River herself (except with green hair because green is her favorite color right now) and River is crying. Big periwinkle blue crayola'd tears.

Honey tries to pull the picture away from River, but River is ferociously angry and she waves the drawing menacingly. For a five year old, the kid has a lot of kinetic power. "I'm giving it to him!"

"River, sweetie, we need to be understanding because Tony was sick—"

But River just eels out of her mother's grip and kicks Tony in the shins. "You missed Thursday night!"

Tony clutches his shin. "Hey! I was *saving the world* at the time."

"That's no excuse! You promised. You were going to show me how to *weld*. We were going to have *pizza*." Small face screwed up in a ferocious scowl, she says loudly. "What do you say?"

"I'm sorry," Tony says slowly, letting go of his shin. River's eyes are red and her face is still kind of blotchy.

Then she hurls herself at him, both arms wrapped tight around his leg, and she's crying into his jeans.

“It was on the news,” Honey says apologetically. “Part of the fight. For a little while…” She tips her head down at Riv, shrugs.

“Don’t do it again,” River mutters, snuffling.

Tony carefully strokes her hair. It’s soft mouse-brown, just like her mother’s. “OK, Riv,” he says, voice scratchy. He must have a cold.

*

When Tony finally gets to read SHIELD’s report on him, he’s more bitter and resigned than angry.

“Agent’s Report: A. E. Stark is paranoid, manipulative, impulsive, hyper-focused, and seemingly unaware of any or all property destruction costs; this is balanced with his knowledge of practical engineering and experimental science, his ability to work well under pressure and with limited tools, and his capacity to make highly unanticipated strategic choices. While Iron Man himself is a powerful figure, Stark’s real asset is the ability to create an Iron Man, both technically and within himself.

Given that A. E. Stark’s health has not returned to baseline after arc reactor upgrade and further given Stark’s status as an unbonded omega, Agent’s recommendation is: A. E. Stark, yes; Iron Man, no.

Stark can best serve the Initiative as a consultant and technological creator. Direct combat would not best serve the Initiative; Stark belongs behind the firing line.

While Stark may be unwilling to pass on the Iron Man suit to SHIELD directly, it is possible (given Stark’s gift to L. Rhodes) that he would be willing to provide one to another agent for use in the field. Secondary recommendation: Find a candidate A. E. Stark might trust enough to do this for.”

Tony slams the folder shut: Right, because Natalie Rushman set such an excellent example of trust.

Right.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> Finally, we have reached Steve. I'm a little nervous about my characterization of Steve, because a lot of fanon writes him as less worldly (which I definitely enjoy!). My grandfather, a lower class city boy, served in WWII. Some of what I include in my characterization of Steve's war time is based on my grandfather and his war stories. Long story short: 1940s had a lot of drinking, fucking, card playing, and smoking. But enough authorial hand-wringing.

After the battle of New York, Steve feels a little less lost. It was hard, it was brutal, but Steve was useful again. A part of him hates how easy it was to fight, but mostly he's just swamped with gratitude that they all made it out alive.

Steve's still angry at the Colonel's deceptions, but he doesn't hold it against the man as much as he probably should.

They're doing debriefs on the Hellicarrier in a gray bare mission room, now that everyone's out of medical. Steve's glad to see that Romanoff is fine from her exposure to the large spear. She's not saying much, but she never does.

Right now, it's just Steve, Romanoff, and Na Stark in the room.

Na Stark is bitchy as ever, which Steve takes as a good sign. A Stark who is silent is a Stark who's near death. Steve has to admit that he really had misjudged him, and he wishes he hadn't said what he'd said. Stark's warm brown eyes are still wary around him, and Steve really regrets how he handled him. It's always tricky to deal with omegas in combat, but still. Steve could have done better.

Part of it was that Steve hasn't been near many omegas since he got out of the ice. SHIELD base has very few, of course, because omegas are far too valuable to risk in such dangerous work. The other part was that Stark is just so—so—Steve doesn't even have the words. When they'd met, Stark had poked at Steve, touched him, and taunted him. Stark's 'gonna make me' had been the most irritating and arousing words Steve heard since he woke up in this godforsaken century. Everyone has been treating Steve with either deference due Captain America or kid gloves (worried about the man in the ice).

Stark is the first person to treat Steve like a tough soldier who can handle being poked and taunted. Yes, Stark's barbs were sharp, but Steve should never have gone to so personal so fast. Should never have told Stark he was worthless.

The lightning flash of pain in those dark brown eyes makes Steve ashamed now. Stark has more than proved his worth, and Steve needs to make this right. Steve has been looking for a time for when he and Stark are alone.

When Romanoff goes to find out what's keeping the Colonel, Steve thinks she's probably really looking for Barton. It's the chance he's been waiting for, though.

"Na Stark," Steve says, voice soft, warm as he can make it.

Stark glances at him, and Steve's belly floods with traitorous warmth. It's not the 40s, things work differently now, but Steve's body remembers the past as weeks ago, not years.

"Na Stark, I'm sorry for the things I said," Steve says, trying to keep as much dominance out of his voice as he can. "I'd just like to--well, apologize."

"Don't mention it," Stark says, curt.

"But--"

"Seriously, Cap, don't mention it." Stark fiddles with his phone. "We were all whammied by that damn phallic symbol. Fucking magic, I hate it."

Steve agrees with the sentiment, even if he doesn't approve of the language, but before he can say anything more, the door opens and some more of the team comes in.

Fury sits at the head of the table, looking as tired as Steve has ever seen him. "Thank you. Just a few matters to deal with before I send you all back in the world."

Barton and Romanoff sit next to each other. Bruce takes a seat next to Stark, who fist bumps him.

Fury tells them how things are turning out. Thor's not coming to this meet, held up with diplomatic relations; he'll be taking Loki back to Asgard. Bruce's request to go to Canada for a couple months has been granted.

"Right," Stark says as soon as Fury has taken a pause for breath. "But we're going to need a team headquarters and I'll be damned if I'm going to let it be on SHIELD property."

Steve watches through his lashes as Stark barrells over the Director. It's an odd mix of arrogance, bravado, bribes, and charm.

At last, Fury says, "I didn't think you'd want the Avengers located in your Tower. My intel says it was badly damaged."

"It is." Stark raises his chin, eyes hard. "But I have other properties."

Fury goes still, and Steve realizes he's surprised. "Are you talking about your house?"

"We need to be housed somewhere with decent security." Stark gives their Hellicarrier room a dubious look.

"If you want to offer rooms to Dr Banner and--"

"I'll have rooms for everyone, but it's on one condition."

"I'm listening," Fury says, eyes very intent.

"I want Barton. He comes or the deal's off." Stark is curt, firm, and Steve knows he means it.

In the corner, Romanoff is practically vibrating with tension. Steve's not sure what Coulson was to them, but his death hit both human agents hard.

Fury looks at him, his one eye meeting Stark's gaze. Steve's impressed, because Fury's a hard man and Stark's an omega, but Stark doesn't back down at all.

"Fine," Fury says at last. "Barton, pack your bags. Stark, he's still going to have visit SHIELD medical for appointments."

Stark shrugs, but Steve's watching Barton, who almost looks surprised, and Romanoff, who's looking at Stark.

*

Steve expects Stark House to be a mansion, but it turns out to be a big industrial building. Inside, there's a very modern living room with lots of improbably cushy couches, a big screen TV, and some quite beautiful art.

Stark shows them around, and Steve starts to understand why Fury said yes. The building is heavily built, almost a fortress of stone and concrete and brick, and the security is intense. No wonder Stark sneered at the Hellicarrier. Jarvis takes a little getting used to, and Steve doesn't like that there are whole floors they don't even have access to. Still, it's nice of Stark to offer them hospitality.

The beds are soft, the kitchen is always stocked, and Jarvis will play any music, television, movie, or entertainment (including video games) on a variety of screens, walls, or glass windows.

Steve finds the decor a little too modern for his taste, but he's not a complainer. He'll get used to it. He's a little worried they'll all fall into pack behavior, living like this, but as the omega it's Stark's job to care for the team's heart. For now, Steve's going to follow his lead.

*

The third night in Stark House, they're playing poker and drinking. It's so similar to the War that Steve's almost relaxed.

To his left, Stark's slouched in his chair. He's got a cigar clamped between his teeth, and there's a bottle of bourbon at his elbow. It's not affecting his playing, and Steve wonders if Stark can count cards like Riker could.

To his right, Natasha has a coffee mug and a bottle of vodka. Her face is her asset, and she betrays absolutely nothing as she plays. Every now and again, she'll splash more of the vodka in her mug.

Across from him, back to the wall, is Barton. He looks gray and ragged. The SHIELD medicos have him doing every last test known to man. Stark's got him some kind of fancy beer, and Barton's only had a couple. He plays well, but like them all, he can talk and play at the same time.

Stark's got some kind of modern music playing, low, more bluesy (Natasha says) than his usual hard rock. Steve suspects it's for Barton's sake.

Into the silence, Barton says, "So I was checking your house out, and man, do you think you've got enough C4 tucked around?"

Stark shifts his cigar slightly, blows out smoke. "Just enough and no more. Why, you need some?"

Steve lifts his head. He's heard that word before--C4. Natasha doesn't seem bothered, but she hadn't been bothered by giant flying aliens.

"No," Barton says. He lays down his bet. "I'm just wondering if it's true. What I heard."

"Which is?" Stark asks. He's completely relaxed, so maybe Steve is wrong. Maybe they're not really talking about what he's thinking they're talking about.

"That this whole house is rigged to blow."

Natasha lays her bet, splashes more vodka in her mug absently.

"Yup." Stark looks at him. "Yo, Rogers, your bet."

"What's C4?" Steve asks, stomach knotting.

"Plastic explosive. Like dynamite, kind of. Very satisfying boom. You'll love it." Stark looks over his glasses at him. "Bet?"

Steve bets, but what's he thinking is a lot of swear words.

"Like, on a timer that you punch?" Barton asks. "A big countdown dial? Big red button?"

"Nah." Stark drinks some bourbon. "It's set to my vitals. Combo of certain keywords, screams, that kind of thing. There's a way to trip it manually, though."

Barton's nodding like that makes sense. Steve throws his hand in because he can't concentrate on his cards. "Are you telling me this house is going to explode?"

"Please. That would ruin the neighborhood. It's a controlled detonation. The whole place'll just collapse in on itself, come down into a pile of rubble. Natasha, you in?"

She wins the hand, but Steve's sitting back, doesn't care. "You know, Fury did not mention that he was sending us all to live in a house that's full of dynamite!"

Stark shuffles the cards, makes a bridge, perfect as always, clever hands moving like he's done it forever, and like he hasn't had half a fifth of bourbon. "What did I tell you, gorgeous? Fury lies."

Natasha grunts, which is like a shout of agreement from her.

Steve's nearly sputtering, because is Stark crazy? Who sets up an entire city block to explode except a supervillain?

Stark's hands just deal cards to each of them.

Barton picks up his hand. "So, it's a complex set of signs, right?"

"Yup."

Steve looks at his cards, and they're not any good, but it doesn't matter. He can barely read them.

"So, if I asked," Barton says, "could you....I mean, we don't really know for sure that what Loki did is..."

Stark looks through the haze of smoke right at Barton. "I can set that up. I'll do it tonight, soon as we're done here."

Steve stares at his cards, but his hearing picks up a soft sight as Barton exhales long. It's relief, Steve realizes. He looks over at Stark, but he's just staring at his cards, rearranging them even though he probably doesn't need to. He must feel Steve's gaze, though, because he looks up, meets Steve's eyes. His gaze is utterly unreadable.

Steve looks back at the table. Barton's breathing is still slower, more relaxed. Steve's neck itches with the idea of living someplace that could just go up in smoke, but it's probably no worse than camping near munitions.

Yeah, right.

*

The recovery work is brutal, and for another couple days, all Steve does is lift heavy things and try to help find bodies.

He isn't sleeping so great, but he's gotten by on less.

When he walks into the living room, exhausted, he slams to a halt.

Stark is sprawled on the couch, in the lap of a couple of good time girls. He's not wearing a shirt and his legs are spread. Sitting at his feet, head between his legs, is another girl. Stark's stroking her hair as she gives him head. There's a couple more girls necking on the couch.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve notices that Barton and Romanoff are playing cards with another girl, who appears to be wearing nothing but a brassiere and Stark's shirt.

But it's Stark that Steve's staring at. Stark's hands are buried in the girl's hair, stroking her hair, and his eyes are closed. He looks absolutely exhausted.

Steve is trying very hard not to do anything about how the whole tableau is making him feel. He's only human.

The woman is making soft liquid sounds as she caresses Stark's dick with her mouth, and the girls next to him are laying down, obviously ready to do more, and Steve's just kind of, well, surprised.

Anyone would be.

Without opening his eyes, Stark says, "Rogers, join in or get out."

Steve really wishes Stark would quit calling him Rogers. It sounds so damn formal, especially if someone is sucking his dick. Steve cannot possibly go over there, cannot possibly join in, for goodness sakes, but he's way too good a strategist to feel anything but ambushed over the whole thing.

He goes over to the card table. "Deal me in?"

They're happy to.

The young woman at the table is wearing the same dark blue cotton shirt that Stark, that *Tony*, was wearing this morning. The soft suggestive sounds from behind him make it really hard for Steve to think of him as anything but Tony.

It's kind of interesting, though, the way the table is set up so that Barton's got an absolutely clear view of the mass of young women having sex over there. In between bets, Steve notices that Barton's gaze drifts over there.

The young woman in the shirt has short soft hair and so much makeup she looks a little like a raccoon. Her lips are slickly painted and she smells of sweet perfume, but not, even to Steve's over-active nose, sex. Her body is curvy and her breasts jiggle when she pumps her hands in the air, which she does every time she wins a round, which is surprisingly often.

Steve wonders for a second where she's come from, and why she's wearing Tony's shirt if they didn't have sex. Behind him, Steve hears a surprisingly breathy moan. One of the women, and then Tony's soft laugh, and Steve has a sudden guess that there's some shuffling around going on, and that Tony's getting the women off, and not the other way around. It's unexpected, and for a second, when Tony laughs again, muffled a little, Steve has to shut his eyes tight.

When he opens them again, the girl at their card table is watching him closely, a little smile on her mouth. "He's sweet, isn't he?" she says.

Steve has just no idea how to answer that.

"Tony," she says, leaning forward, and wow, cleavage. Steve's gaze dropped by accident. He looks back up at her face.

"He's a real sweetheart," she says. "Not many people know that, but I bet you've guessed, huh?"

She lays down her bet and it's Steve turn, and he takes it as a reprieve. "I don't think I've really thought of him that way, but I think you're right."

Steve focuses hard on the cards, and she says, "Give me a light." Barton's got a lighter out, clicking it for her as she inhales deep.

If Steve loses a lot more hands than usual, well, Barton's not doing his usual best either. The girl and Natasha are cleaning their clocks.

It's a couple hours before Tony gets up and wanders over to get dealt in. He's wearing pants, for which Steve is grateful, because Tony's reeking of girl-sex. Even though Steve tried hard not to, he'd listened to all of the breathy moans and sighs, and he would swear that Tony never actually had an orgasm, but the women sure did.

Tony's shirtless, of course, and sweaty, but he looks a lot more relaxed. He tells the girl to share some of the booze. Behind him, Steve sees that most of the girls have curled up into a pile on the couch, like kittens, but a couple are playing video games. It's quite a display, even so. Nobody is wearing clothes.

After a couple hands, Barton goes to get another bottle for Natasha. He can be very courteous.

While Barton's away, Tony looks at the girl, then Barton's spot at the table. She takes a drag on her cigarette and nods, just slightly.

When Barton comes back, he gives Natasha her drink, and then stretches. "Think I'll turn in."

He slips away, and Steve isn't at all surprised when the girl slips after him.

Natasha pours a last shot, raises her glass to Stark, and drinks.

*

In the morning, Steve goes for his morning run a lot later than usual. He can't get drunk, but he was up late after a hard day's work.

When he gets back, the kitchen is full of good smells.

Steve wanders in, surprised. He had no idea anyone here could cook.

Tony's standing next to the stove, wearing unbuttoned jeans and nothing else. He's got a cigarette hanging off his lip, and his clever hands are chopping vegetables, fast as a prep cook.

At the table is his friend, the girl from the card table. Everyone else has vanished, and the living room is pristine again. At least the girl's wearing something today, a big red-silk robe that Steve is sure is Tony's.

"Morning," Tony says, not looking up. "Sit with Honey. Breakfast will be done in a few."

Steve's trying not to stare again, really he is, but it's just a sight--Tony Stark shirtless, weilding a knife, in his own kitchen. It would make a hell of a drawing, and no one at SHIELD would believe him.

He sits next to Honey, and Steve thinks they must be friends, because she talks to Tony while she's waiting. He's already served her coffee, heavy with cream, and Tony sets a cup down in front of Steve while he's making a pass to fetch some eggs. Steve isn't sure what he's doing here, but he says thank you, because he's trying.

"See," Honey whispers, "Tony's a sweetheart, right?"

Steve has to smile back at her, because Tony's back is now a firm stiff line, embarrassed. "Right."

The plate that Tony sets in front of him is piled high, and if Tony sets it down a little harder than necessary, well, Steve doesn't mind. There's enough calories there to fuel him for the day's work. Potatoes and eggs with cheese and bacon and ham and a stack of toast three deep, spread with jam.

Tony gives Honey a much smaller plate, and her eggs have different things in them. Peppers and onions and less cheese.

Steve eats the food in front of him. It's strange, but nice.

Honey and Tony bicker. Honey knows this guy, "You *always* know this guy," Tony says, like it's an old familiar argument or joke, and she just says, "Well, I know a *lot* of guys," and he says, "Ain't that the truth," and by the time Steve's done with breakfast, Honey's talked Tony into fixing someone's F150, whatever that is, and a lawnmower.

When Steve offers to do the dishes, Tony just shakes his head. "Get to work, Rogers. Dead aliens to move, galas to attend. I got this."

*

When Steve sees Barton at headquarters, coming out of yet another medical test go-round, Steve thinks Barton's eyes are a little less worn.

"Hey," Barton says. "Can you tell Stark thanks? You know, for the hookers and blow."

Steve wants to sigh, but doesn't. "Sure thing, Clint."

When he repeats the message to Tony, Tony just laughs.

*

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

> I'll be alternating between Tony's and Steve's POV for the next while. Generally, I'll split them into separate chapters by POV, even if it makes the chapter a little short.

Tony's in his eighth floor workshop with the bots. He's got Jarvis doing continual holographic projections of his main work and he's got Led Zeppelin III on softly in the background. Propped on an old biology table is a giant chunk of dead flying lizard alien.

"No, check the fourth vertebrae thing," Na Anderson is saying from the massive webcam Jarvis is projecting on the wall. "Your other fourth. Yes, better, OK, no, up. There. Right there. Give me that reading."

Tony's wearing gloves up to his shoulders and protective surgical goggles. He samples the spot she wants with his surgical sampler, then he carries it over to the fancy R&D element scanner.

Now they wait for the machine to do its tests.

"You know," Tony says, stripping off his gloves, "I think it's fucking typical of my life that my reward for saving the world is getting assigned garbage duty."

Na Anderson doesn't laugh, and Tony's sorry he made the joke now. Every time he mentions the portal, even obliquely, her mouth gets tight. One time she burst into tears. It was mortifying for them both.

All she says is, "Tony, the chance that they assigned you garbage detail is slim and none. You volunteered once you saw the problem."

Tony points a scary surgical pointy-thing at her. "I did not!"

"Uh huh." She peers at a reading on her StarkTablet.

"I am a very busy man! I don't volunteer to pick up garbage!"

She's smiling again, and Tony's relieved. "Technically true. What you said was that there was no way the disposal companies could haul away a flying fucking evil brontosaurus using dump trucks, shovels, and a couple of prayers."

"When did I say that? I didn't say that." Had he? Jesus. Tony's been low on sleep for the past four days, but it's not like people trapped in crunched buildings waiting for rescue could

wait indefinitely. Tony's got the only damn suit in the US that flies and is protected from crushing, so he's been a little busy, that's all.

"I watched a clip of you saying that on CNN." One corner of her mouth quirks up. "While some EMT patched a cut on your forehead and you inhaled coffee."

Huh, so that had really happened. "All the reporters kind of run together after a while."

Na Anderson sets down her tablet. "Honey, do you know what else I found out?"

Tony grabs a pair of goggles and pops them on. "I'm going to grab some samples from this big guy's toe, I think."

"*Tony*."

Tony warily looks at her. "What?"

"I spoke to Agent Baylor about the lab space I'll be working in tomorrow."

Oh, was that all? Tony pulls the goggles back off. No need to look like a nervous wreck. "If you don't like the set-up, I have the go ahead to move you someplace else. NYU's medical research department is the best for our purposes, I think, and it's got good security, experienced techs, and it's got roads that still run to it. I told you the Tower's not an option because the streets around it are just too damaged, and we'll need to have a lot of people moving in and out, supplies, personel, training, the works. The quinjet will pick up you, Aliana, and Paul at 9, so you'll have time to look it over before they get the equipment from your shop into the air."

"Tony, Agent Baylor said that a bunch of people are staying in your house."

Tony drops his small sampling pick. He bends down to pick it up, rolls it in his hands. "It's —complicated. I told you about, you know, about--" He can't even say Phil's name.

"I know, baby. And I understand why you want his bond-mate to stay with you."

"I couldn't just leave him to the government stooges. It wouldn't be right. They're going to blame him. As it is, I'm worried he won't make it. I know SHIELD needs to do their own tests, but I'm sure Loki's whammy is done, and even if it isn't, there are things I've done to assure that--"

"*Tony*." Her voice is loud and firm, stilling his babble. "When were you going to tell me that you invited Steven Rogers to live in your house?"

Tony hunches his shoulders. He's good at handling anger. Even disappointment. But gentle concern is just not something he has any defenses against. "It's *Captain America*."

There's a pause, but Tony doesn't look up. He's busy fidgeting.

"You told me he was a jerk," she says at last.

Tony shrugs one shoulder. “Look. This isn’t a big deal. He’s harmless.”

“Steven Rogers is not and has never been harmless.” Her voice is desert dry, but full of conviction. “Captain America is a symbol, but Captain Rogers is a warrior.”

“Dad was crazy about him, you know. If Dad didn’t have a hardcore thing for busty little omegas, I’d say he was head over heels for that lab experiment.”

“Tony, I’m not a drunk party guest. I’m not going to let you lead the conversation astray. Not even if you tell me charming stories of your dad being an ass.”

“Worth a try, right?”

“Right. Now come close to the camera.”

Tony scuffs his converse against the cool concrete of the workshop floor. He should really get the bots to dust this place again soon.

“Now look at me.” Her voice is gentle, soft.

Tony glances up, back down, embarrassed. She’s going to be able to see it, because she can see everything.

“Oh Tony, honey.” Na Anderson sighs. “I wish you’d just told me.”

“I’ve been busy rescuing people from crashed out buildings! And making sure there’s no more alien invaders! And that the world economy doesn’t crash just because the Stock Exchange got Hulk smashed!”

“Getting your first crush is a lot more important than superficial damage to a building!”

Tony slams down his tool. “I do not have a crush. I just felt sorry for him. He’s all alone in this world, and he’s like a little lost duck. When I invited Barton, the others just sort of followed me home.”

“Uh huh. I’ve changed my mind. I’m not going to stay in the house off NYU.”

Tony’s head whips up and he feels, well, hurt. It’s the first time in his life he’s ever really directly asked for help.

Getting a look at him, she says, “I’m going to stay with *you*.”

“But it’s Captain America. He saves kittens on his lunch break and he probably farts American flags.”

“Very handy on the Fourth, I’m sure. I don’t care if he’s a canonized saint. Tony, you are not living with a hard-line alpha without a chaperone.”

Oh my god. Tony leans forward, aggravated. “I hate to break it to you, but I have actually had sex, you know.”

“Don’t be a brat.”

Tony throws up his hands. “I can invite whoever I want to live here!”

“I never said you couldn’t. But you’re not doing this unprotected. I don’t care if the guy has a black belt in personal restraint.” She slams her own tools down on her own table and the sound is sharp as a shot. “Your heats are unreliable, Tony. What the hell are you going to do if one hits you while you’re with him?”

“It won’t.”

“What if it does?”

“Then I guess I’ll get the ride of a lifetime.” Tony sets his jaw. “Look, you think I don’t know the risks?”

“You always know the risks. But you always think the benefits outweigh the cost to yourself. People going to lose some jobs? Oh well, that’s far more important than any possible safety risk to Na Stark. Board not happy with the profit margin? Oh well, stay up working with volatile chemicals until you’ve found a way to make more money. Who care about chemical exposure to Na Stark. Stupid government fuckwits picking fights with each other? Na Stark’s happy to show up in a giant tin can to make them play nice.”

Tony takes a deep breath. “It’s not like that, I—“

“It is exactly like that!” She’s shouting. “It is exactly like that, Tony. You know what it felt like to watch you carry that damn bomb to the sky?”

“It was me or Manhattan!”

“I would have picked you!”

Tony jerks back, shocked. “You wouldn’t have. You’d have done something else.”

“I’d have done it myself. Before I would ever let you do it. Believe it.”

Tony scrubs his hands over his face. They shouldn’t have tried to talk about this yet. It’s too soon. “I’m sorry.”

“Tony. Don’t apologize for saving the world. Look, all I’m saying is that I think someone needs to start paying attention to your best interests. Having Barton, that’s OK, Tony. It’s a kind thought. Dr Banner? He’s probably fine, too. I don’t like Agent Romanoff, but I can respect her enough to know that she wouldn’t do a thing to take you, not like that.”

Tony slumps onto a rolly stool, absently turns it left and right. “So you just don’t like Captain America.”

“I haven’t met him yet,” she reminds him gently. “All I want is to meet him, get a feel for the situation, and then yes, if I think it’s best, I want to be close by. Your heats are still unregulated, and Captain Rogers is a man out of time.”

Tony pushes hard against the cement, spins all the way around. "I guess I didn't give you a very good impression of him. He was a friend of dad's you know."

"From what you've said, I can see how they would get on."

Tony winces. "Look, Steve's not that bad. He just thought I was kind of, you know, selfish."

She's pinching the bridge of her nose, hard, so Tony hurries on. "I think he warmed up to me a little by the end."

"I'm not sure whether to be relieved or horrified," she mutters.

Tony thinks of Steve stealing into a closed and locked room to find all the guns. "And he's kind of sneaky. I can't go into details, but he's not just a perfect jawline. Good in a fight, pretty decent strategist, surprisingly good at poker."

Na Anderson sighs. "So, tomorrow, once the kids and the chaperones and the guards are settled in up at NYU, you can show me the progress you've made on the solvents, and then I'll meet your Captain. OK?"

Tony fiddles with his latest holographic pen. "You can't."

"God give me strength."

"It's not like that. It's just that—" Tony throws the pen down, stalks around the space. "He might recognize you."

Na Anderson goes still. "Do you think that's likely?"

"I calculate a 27.6% chance, but my Steve guesses aren't as accurate as my usual guesses."

"I'm going to meet him. We do dinner anyway."

Tony crouches down in front of the nearest webcam, giving her his full attention. "It's going to be hard enough for you to leave school. You haven't done it since the arc reactor, have you?"

"No," she says quietly, looking at her own hands.

"We've got dead aliens the size of skyscrapers laying around in highly populated areas full of structural damage. Right now we have no idea whether they're carrying biocontaminants, viruses, bugs, acid blood, pupae. Nothing."

Na Anderson's hands are still in her lap.

"I know you think I keep making the sacrifice play, but I swear, this time, it's important. Travel in and out of New York is restricted right now, but people are going to hike out, drive out, walk out. We don't know what the damage is, not really, not yet. We don't know anything. You're one of the few people who can help us find out."

“I hate when you do this,” she says, but Tony knows, just from her tone, that he’s won.

“I wouldn’t ask unless it was important.”

She sighs. “I know. I wish—“ She shakes her head. “I promise that I’ll be very careful. I’ll get started on finding a way to deal with the biggest of the corpses, maybe at least get you some preliminary alloys that we can make into saws, meat hooks, something like that.”

Tony relaxes slightly. “I got the go ahead to work with the head of Dynex. They’re going to give us some prelim specs on a treatment plant dump site. We can look it over.”

“Tony.” Her hands twist together. “I understand why you don’t want me to meet him right away. I don’t agree with it. I’m willing to take that risk.”

“I’m *not*.”

She holds up her hand. “I understand that, I said. But I want you to think about something. Will you do that for me?”

Tony scowls. Like he’s got a choice.

“I want you to believe, in your heart, that you are worth as much as I am. I want you to hold out for a partner that you can introduce to me. Maybe that’s Captain Rogers. Maybe it isn’t. But I don’t think it’s so much to ask, that you find someone you’d trust to sit at a dinner table with me, do you?”

“It’s not that simple. If he wasn’t who he is—“ Tony trails off. Even here, even in his own home, even with Jarvis, he won’t talk about it.

“What have I always told you?” she asks him.

“Never trust nobody?”

Na Anderson laughs. “That was not me, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Not everyone deserves the truth,” Tony says. “Not everyone has earned it.”

“That’s right. If you’re trusting him with your home, you’re trusting him with part of your heart.”

Tony grimaces. He doesn’t like it, because he has no intention of trusting Rogers with anything but his body. And even then, probably not. Tony cares too much about the Avengers Initiative to waste his ‘saving the world’ cred on sleeping with a guy, no matter how much his body is the pinacle of human perfection. Still, she might have a point. A very very small point, obviously. Just being inside Tony’s home means that a person will learn things about him. It’s why Tony hardly lets anyone inside, and if he does let them inside, it’s only to certain wings and certain floors. Rogers and Barton and Romanoff, they’re not just hanging out, they’re living here.

“Look, I’ll talk to you every day. Just to check in. Make sure he’s not thrown the whammy on me.”

“Yes, because I’m sure the vibranium shield is exactly a whammy,” Na Anderson says, amused. “But yes, thank you. I appreciate that very much.”

Tony sighs. “He’s really not such a bad guy.”

“I’ll take your word for it. For now.”

For a while, they both work in silence. Jarvis tells them results of the different samples taken. Tony looks over Na Anderson’s alloy tests. She looks over his prelim giant lizard-meat crane design.

With the hard stuff out of the way, Tony’s able to enjoy it. Nothing is as relaxing as throwing himself into an interesting mechanical problem, and Na Anderson always helps him see metal in new ways. When they’ve got a few more steps down the research road, he tells her to go to bed. She’s got to prep her substitute teacher for the next couple weeks’ worth of classes. He’s got to, well, lie in bed and stare at the ceiling, actually.

But there’s no need to mention that.

“Goodnight,” he says.

“Goodnight,” she says. Her hand touches the shelf where the web cam lives, ready to turn it off. Her hand is small, scarred from work, callused. “If you end up awake at 3 am again, try chamomile tea.”

Tony watches the screen flicker black and smiles. She always does know him far too well.

Chapter 25

"The New York City Reborn Gala Proudly Sponsored by..."

The list of sponsors covers nearly half the card, each of the sponsor's ugly corporate logos engraved in the heavy cardstock and picked out in gilt ink. Steve sets the invitation card carefully back on the small side table where waiters are bustling around, arranging more champagne on trays and fixing appetizer platters.

Steve is in their way, but he needs a break. Stark had said no one would mind, and when he thought Steve wasn't looking, he'd palmed some bills to the waitstaff. They'd all winked at Stark, and smiled at Steve, and so, a reprieve.

It's kind of embarrassing, but sweet. Honey's right. Stark's a sweetie.

Steve's suit is perfectly fitted, but the tie still feels tight. At the advice of SHIELD's PR rep, Steve is wearing an actual suit-suit, not his dress uniform or his costume. It doesn't seem right, doesn't seem respectful, but they'd assured him that People magazine would be here, and everyone wanted to know what Captain America dressed up as.

SHIELD planned to send him to Bloomingdale's, but Stark had burst into a long rant that involved Fashion Week, suit cuts, the color black, branding campaigns, Super-Soldier shoulders, the evilness of 'off-the-rack', and the cities of Milan and London against whom New York has apparently been in a duel to the death, don't you understand the honor at stake, until SHIELD's PR rep was in tears and said, "But I don't have any *budget*!"

"Oh, is that the problem? That is not a problem," and then Stark had tossed a black plastic card on the table and her tears had turned to a gasp of delight of awe ("Would you *really*?" "Consider the good Captain taken care of, sugar." "Oh, *Na Stark*!").

Steve moves out of the way of another bevy of waiters, empty trays in hand, and wonders gloomily if the team's beautiful omega slept with her. No, that's unfair. Steve knows it's unfair, especially after what Stark has done for the city, the world, but the thought sneaks in anyway.

This new century is damn different, and Steve's just not used to it. That's got to be it. Anyone would have trouble.

Steve's read Stark's file. Educated until twenty one; highly-published in engineering, chemistry, computer hardware, and, oddly, popular science magazines; only a handful of short contract marriages; no kids; supposed to be both charming and vicious; the Merchant of Death; Iron Man; brilliant; difficult; sexually promiscuous. Unbonded.

The last one keeps returning to Steve's thoughts. He knows why, it's just biology. But Stark's part of the team now. How much a part of the team, Steve isn't sure yet, but Stark being unbonded will make this easier. It's good that they have an omega in the Avengers; Steve is

grateful this much hasn't changed about this stupid new world. He's just not sure how to go about telling Stark that.

Steve leaves his quiet little cave of peace and moves back into the crowds. Immediately, he's accosted by ladies in shimmering gowns and guys in monkey suits.

Steve's artist eye knows that his own suit, hand-sewn under Na Stark's exacting personal directions, is even nicer than the ones everyone else is wearing. This, too, is a relief. Maybe it's a new century, maybe Na Stark's 'not good at playing with others', but he's still an omega, and he's taken care to make sure the team's lead alpha looks good tonight.

It's a comfort.

There's a swirl in the crowd, so Steve makes his way through the gaps. He doesn't like standing in the center of any room with people on all sides. It's just lousy strategy. When a woman near the bar becons him over, Steve goes willingly. He doesn't know her, but the bar is almost as good as a wall at his back. Steve leans against it, talks to her for a bit. Hannah Divers is a VP of Communications for some company Steve didn't catch the name of. Despite being an alpha, she's putting out sex pheromones like crazy.

Steve should be paying attention, because it's rude not to, but in the eddy of the crowd he catches sight of Na Stark.

The team's omega is stunning tonight, as usual, but that's not what draws Steve's eye. Stark's got his hand around a woman's waist, and she's leaning into him. On Stark's other side is a man, and that guy's way too close to Stark's personal space. Is kissing Stark on the cheek, nuzzling his neck, laughing. Stark is letting him.

The woman has her arm around Stark's back now, leaning in further to say something.

"Excuse me," Steve says, cutting off Hannah Divers VP of Communications. He's gone before she can reply.

As he gets closer, Steve watches Stark's face, his body language. The woman and the man are so close, and they keep touching Stark, and Stark keeps letting them. Yes, OK, Stark is pretty free with his affections, and he's very tolerant of other people touching him. Steve's seen the photos of people with their arms around him, people kissing him, people hugging him. The SHIELD file on Stark's amorous activities is nearly an inch thick and there's a lot of photographic evidence.

This is different.

Stark's body language is soft, warm, comfortable. When he turns to murmur in the woman's ear, she ducks her head and laughs. There's no tension in the line of Stark's neck when that man leans in to say something right against Stark's neck.

Steve watches someone else, a stranger --no not a stranger, but certainly not someone Stark must like?-- approach the trio. Stark's body is like a wire suddenly strung taut again. He's letting the stranger approach, shake hands, kiss his cheek, but the loose warmth is all gone.

At Stark's sides, the woman and the man edge in closer, touch him, affectionate, protective. In just a moment, the stranger has finished what they wanted to say, has an apparently pleasant word with each of Stark's companions, and drifts away again.

That's when the looseness returns. Stark's body doesn't soften, exactly, but there's a tension that just flows away.

Steve's seen this before, years ago now, but fresh as yesterday. He wonders if anyone else knows that Tony Stark doesn't actually like to be touched.

While Steve's thinking that, Tony Stark looks up, sees Steve. Steve smiles cautiously and approaches. He's been caught staring, and it would be far too rude to pretend he wasn't.

"Hey Cap," Stark says. He's got an arm around each of his companions, and now that Steve's close, he can tell that both companions are omegas.

Ah, of course. Now it makes sense.

"Stark," Steve says, trying to soften his smile for each of them. "Who are your friends?"

"These hooligans? I went to school with these losers."

The woman on his left nuzzles Stark's cheek. It's so affectionate, so genuine, that Steve feels a sharp pang of longing. "Melody Harmon. It's nice to meet you," she says.

She doesn't offer her hand, and Steve decides fast not to offer his. He doesn't want to watch her stiffen and tense at his touch. "A pleasure. Captain Steven Rogers."

"That's Captain Alpha America Alpha," Tony tells her and she pokes him playfully.

"And I'm Alex Richardson," the man says. He's short, like Stark, with medium brown hair and lively hazel eyes. His suit is simple, navy, white shirt, dark blue tie, but it's as fine as Steve's own.

"CEO of Price Manufacturing," Tony says. Steve's never heard Tony's voice so warm or so proud before. "Alex is going to be doing the drain repair for us, Cap."

"The drain repair at the Tower?" Because Steve has no idea what drains Stark is talking about.

"No, no, well, that too, obviously. Alex does all my drains. I meant New York. Price is doing Manhattan at cost, helping out, and I'm trying to talk him into doing all the civil surveying, too."

"Tony," Alex says, and it's fond and exasperated. "I'm not sure the Mayor's all that keen on having us scramble over their rubble. It's just--"

"No, no, this is perfect. You're the best, of course you're going to do it. Didn't you tell me you had the manpower? Do you need more survey crews? Equipment? Because I can get my factory to make--"

"I can get my own factory to make more equipment, sweetheart," Alex says, cutting Stark off with what appears to be long practice. "And we have the crews. I'm just not sure the Mayor wants us, he's got an election to worry about."

Sweetheart. It's common these days, and it doesn't mean anything, especially between two omegas, but it makes Steve notice the way Alex's hands stroke Tony's shoulders. It's the way a lover does, after sex, and while none of the omegas in front of him are shrieking 'do me now big boy', there's a subtle undercurrent of arousal to it all.

"Why wouldn't the Mayor want you? You're the best! Have you seen your Yelp reviews Richardson?"

Melody's laughing. Her hands have rings and she's wearing a necklace with a large ruby, but her hand is running through Stark's hair, down his neck. "Boys! Maybe the Captain isn't interested in your engineering babble."

Stark opens his mouth, but Steve says, "It's interesting. I think it's swell that you're helping out with the relief efforts, Sa Richardson."

"Swell," Stark mouths, eyes dancing.

"If you've got the workforce and the skills, I think you should offer to do the civil surveys," Steve says earnestly. "I'm not sure what you think the trouble would be. The sooner we get the city rebuilt, the better the Mayor's re-election will go, surely."

He's said something wrong, Steve can tell. All three stop laughing and look at each other. "You must really have been --absent for a while," Melody says at last.

"What did I tell you?" Stark says. "I'm hurt, deeply hurt, Mel, that you did not take my word as gospel. He was--"

"Why wouldn't the Mayor want Price Manufacturing to do the surveys?" Steve asks. He's used to Stark's digressions, and he knows it's one of the ways the charming omega diverts the conversation from painful subjects.

They all look at each other again. "Because I'm CEO," Alex says, wry.

"You're a fucking fabulous CEO," Stark says hotly. He's turning dark bright eyes on Steve, clearly picking a fight.

"So what's the problem?" Steve says. "I don't get it." Even though he's pretty sure he does. Alex is one of the most alluring omegas he's even smelled. Like fresh turned soil just exposed to sunshine. Unbonded. Unclaimed. Despite the wedding ring on his finger.

"Everyone knows omegas are too busy fucking to do business," Melody says. Though the discussion is about Richardson, both Melody and Richardson move closer to Stark. Interesting.

"Well, if the Mayor says no to you to working in Manhattan, that's OK by me," Steve says. "I've got some pull in Brooklyn. We'll get you set up there. Those rich boys in the City can

do their own darn drains."

Stark's eyes narrow at Steve, considering, but he doesn't say anything. Alex looks down and smiles shyly, and Melody reaches out to touch Steve's arm. Her fingertips brush his sleeve, then her hand drops. "Thank you."

Being smiled at by three omegas at once is a little dizzying. Steve ducks his head. "It's nothing, ma'am."

Some fella from a big communications company shows up then, and Steve watches Stark slide back into the brash man Steve had insulted on the Helicarrier. Alex nuzzles the back of Stark's neck, and for a second, Stark's eyes slide shut in what Steve is certain is sexual pleasure. Stark sure doesn't move away from it. Then Alex is murmuring in Stark's ear, kissing Melody goodbye, thanking Steve again.

Melody leaves only a few minutes after Alex does, her goodbyes just as sexual, an overly familiar hand on Stark's hip, her nose buried in the nape of his neck. Steve's nostrils sing at the smell of hot iron, Stark's scent increased by their caresses. The pleasure sure doesn't make Stark any mellower, because he's insulting the communications mogul fast and sharp.

When the man stalks off in a huff, Stark mutters, "*Finally*. What an asshole."

Steve hadn't really paid that much attention to what the guy had said. "Mm," he says, a noncommital noise the SHIELD folks seem to take as paying attention. Steve had been too busy thinking about the way Stark smells, the way those omegas had touched him like they had every right, remembering other omegas in other times.

Maybe the world only *said* it had changed. Maybe some things were the same, just called different things.

"Are you even listening? I thought Captain America wasn't allowed to blow people off at parties?"

"I liked your friends," Steve says. If he responded to every one of Stark's jibes, they'd never have a conversation.

"Oh. Yeah, they're great, aren't they?" Stark grabs a drink from a waiter moving through the crowd. "Mel really wanted to meet Natasha."

"Because she's the female Avenger?" Steve guesses, though he's not sure. Melody had been dressed in very feminine style, but she moved differently, graceful but dangerous.

"Because she's got about a million black belts and loved Romanov's moves," Stark says. His voice has lost its warm soft tone, and Steve's sorry for it.

"So that's why she moved like that," Steve says. "I wondered."

"Omegas in your day probably didn't get to learn judo."

"No, it's not that. Nobody in my day learned judo." Would that help? So often, Steve is adrift with Stark. He steps on landmines by accident.

"Huh. Guess even Enter the Dragon was before your time." Stark knocks the rest of the drink back and holds out his empty glass. Sure enough, someone hustles up to take it. Steve bites down on his comment, because he can see Stark's eyes on him just waiting for Steve to snap about the drinking.

"You said you met them at school?"

"What? Oh, sure. We went to boarding school together." Stark's looking around again.

Steve takes a drink off a passing tray without bothing to look. Stark's had enough to drink, but this isn't the hill he wants to die on. He offers the glass of champagne, and Stark takes it. "You looked close."

Stark goes completely still, drink halfway to his mouth. His whole body is tight, vibrating with tension. "If you think--" He clamps his jaw tight, and Steve can see the muscle jerk.

"It's--I'm sorry," Steve says. "Is it rude to notice that these days? In my day--" He stops. Steve always says the wrong thing with Stark. Always.

"In your day, what?" Stark snaps. "No, go on, tell me, I want to know, grandpa."

Steve wishes he'd just left after the introductions. Anything he says now will probably make it worse, but then again, maybe he should just set down his own expectations and try to explain.

"In my day," Steve says, deliberately not pushing direct eye contact onto an upset omega, "it was considered nice if omegas had, um, special friends."

"Special friends," Stark repeats, voice hard and low, eyes narrowing at Steve. "What the hell does that mean?"

Steve continues to refuse the eye contact, looking carefully over Stark's shoulder. It's about as submissive as Steve gets, but he really hadn't intended to start an argument. There's also the chance he's in the wrong here, given the times. "When omegas are especially affectionate with each other. Talk all the time. Enjoy each other," Steve clears his throat, unwilling to say it out loud directly, "without another type present. Is that not what they're called now?"

Starks swallows all of his drink. "You're a constant puzzle, Mr Frosty." He doesn't sound angry anymore, which is good. Confusing, but good. Steve must have made some time-related social error.

"I don't mean to be, and I wish you'd quit calling me ice names."

"It's too much fun. You always blush."

"I do not," Steve says, glaring back at him directly. His cheeks feel warm, but he is *not* blushing.

"Yes you do," Stark says, sing-songing it, almost playful. He looks up at Steve through his lashes suddenly. It's a good look for him, Steve thinks. No wonder his partner list is a folder an inch thick. "It really doesn't bother you that I had sexy funtimes with Alex and Mel. Recreational, no alpha cock."

"I really wish you wouldn't use language like that," Steve mutters.

"Yeah, yeah. But it doesn't. You don't care that we fucked at school."

"At school? I thought--"

"Ohhhhh, you thought we were still burning up the sheets. Mel's wearing enough bling to outfit a jewelry store, Alex's got a wedding band."

"They--the way they touched you--I just thought--"

Stark appears absolutely *delighted*. "Oh my god, you did! You thought we were still fucking. My my, the past sure is another country. I would have thought the infidelity would be a deal-breaker for Captain Conservative, but maybe hot O on O action overrides that."

"It's not--" Steve scowls, looks around. "Why do you always do this? Nevermind. And it's not infidelity. Not--or, it wasn't in my day. Not if--" God, only Stark can wind him up like this.

"Reaaaaaaallly," Stark drawls. "I get it. If there's no alpha in the room, it doesn't count as sex?"

"Something like that," Steve mutters. "I wish you wouldn't--I just thought it was nice that you had friends you were comfortable with."

"I'm 'comfortable' with lots of people, Captain, didn't Fury tell you?" Starks air quotes are ironic as they are graceful.

Steve meets his gaze, holds it. "I don't pay as much attention to what people say as what I see for my own eyes, Stark. I liked your friends, that's all. You smelled happy when they touched you. I haven't seen that before. I won't mention it again."

Steve turns and walks away. Stark had looked startled, off his guard. Steve's seen that enough to know that Stark doesn't like being surprised. Better to drop the subject than get into more of a fight. Especially when Steve doesn't understand the finer points of today's relationship etiquette.

Chapter 26

Later that night, the party has hit the tawdry stage. The glitz and glitter seem cheap, the fresh hotel scent is smeared with spilled wine, stale cigarettes, too much perfume, warm bodies.

Steve has a headache, which seems unfair given the serum in his veins. He's been directed to stay 'as long as possible' by SHIELD, because the party is good PR and because the cost had been thousands of dollars per plate. Plate of what, Steve isn't sure. All the appetizers have been served with elegant printed napkins and toothpicks.

So far, he's fended off thirty three sexual advances. Seventeen betas, eleven alphas, and a surprising four omegas. The omegas all had taken scents. Steve just isn't used to the new century enough, because he turned them all down with as many complements as he could think of. Steve's not a prude, but he's not a poacher, either.

Still, the drunker the guests get the more rude the advances. He brushes absently at a small spot on his sleeve. He hopes the spilled drink won't stain. It's probably going to get him in trouble, but Steve is searching for Stark.

Yes, brave new world, but Stark is still the Avenger's omega. Steve is the lead alpha. It's his responsibility to make sure Stark is safe.

He's glad he did when he sees a couple behind a set of potted plants. He recognizes the dark hair, the perfect slim shoulders. It's a woman in a backless red dress, and she's got her hand on the front of Stark's pants.

Steve's not close enough yet to see whether Stark likes it, but he can hear fine.

"Your hand is on my crotch, lady." Stark's voice is flat, not encouraging, moving straight to pissed.

Steve starts walking faster. He dodges around someone who tries to talk to him.

"Of course it is, baby. I could smell you across the room. God, you smell like a whole buffet of sexual delights--"

"Get your hand off my pants." Stark's voice is firmer, but it's still quiet.

"Aw, you want a little warm up? You felt firm enough to me, but all right, you pushy little thing."

Steve hears a rustle, a gasp, a hiss, and then a thud. He starts to run.

"I said *no*. Goddammit." Stark's voice sounds strangled, and even Steve knows what it means. He's heard that tone before. When he gets there, she's turned Stark towards the wall and she's plastered herself against his back. One of her hands in on the front of his pants, one on the back of his neck. He's struggling, but it's getting fainter.

It takes no effort to grab the woman by the waist and haul her bodily up and off Stark. Steve marches her, struggling, over to a pair of security guards, who trot over to meet him. "Kick her out," Steve says, "or I will."

"Sir, yes, sir," one of them says. "This way, ma'am." The woman's talking, but Steve ignores her.

When he gets back, Stark is braced with his back against the wall. Steve hovers, not coming any closer, but blocking anyone who even thinks of approaching.

Stark's eyes are shut, his breathing jagged. Like this, Steve thinks the omega looks tired, no *exhausted*. If he didn't know better, Steve thinks Stark looks almost ashamed.

The sour smell of fear mixes with the tang of iron-hot arousal. Stark's hands are braced against the wall, knuckles white. A fine bracelet on Stark's hand is shimmering faintly, and Steve knows it's because Stark's trembling.

Steve is still staring, trying to figure it out, when Stark's eyes open. "Didn't anybody tell you it's rude to stare?" he asks, but even his voice is rough, off, not the usual fast light tumble of words.

"She's gone."

"Yeah--" Stark shuts his eyes again. The strain on his features is painful to watch. He lets out a sigh. "Yeah. Gone."

Steve looks around, searching the crowd.

"Who're you looking for, Polar Bear?"

"Mel or Alex." Steve is sure they would know what to do.

"Jesus, Cap, they left hours ago." Stark shoves off the wall. He throws his cuffs, adjusts the bracelets on each wrist. They're not Iron Man bracelets, they're just decorative, Steve thinks. Too bad. "Besides, what the hell?"

"You're upset," Steve says, because he's not really interested in playing pretend.

"It was nothing." Stark isn't looking him. He's half turned, and his body language is closed off. "I'm fine."

"You look like hell, Stark."

"Well, fuck you very much, too, gorgeous." It lacks Stark's usual bite.

"I'm taking you home." Steve's mouth usually obeys his mind, but not always. Besides, it's the truth. Stark has had enough people pawing at him. Even a polished charmer like Stark shouldn't have to put up with being molested at this kind of affair just to raise some extra dough for the city.

But instead of the grumble or insult Steve's expecting, Stark flinches. It's fast, gone almost immediately, but when Steve steps closer, guarding him automatically, there's another flinch, and the smell of fear is sharp and mixes horribly with the allure of Stark's arousal. "Are you--" Steve stops. That question can end nowhere good. Stark isn't attracted to him, because that would be too strange. Of course, Steve is the team alpha and Stark's an omega. According to the rules Steve is used to, Stark would already be in Steve's bed.

"I'm fine," Stark says again, but he's backed against the wall again.

"Each time you say that, I believe it less. Come on, home." Steve steps into Stark's personal space, smooth and slow. He doesn't want to frighten him, but he does intend for Stark to know he means it.

Stark looks sharply away, but doesn't move.

Of course. Steve is in the way. It would be rude for an omega to shove past his alpha, even under orders. Damn, he's out of practice. Steve slips to one side, keeping his own back between Stark and the outside world, leaving Stark a clear path between Steve and the wall. Stark gives him a wary look, but moves into the space, hesitant as any of the beauties Steve remembers from the war.

The woman Steve pulled off Stark is still arguing with the security guards. Steve can hear her shrill, obnoxious tones. The words 'my lawyers' keep getting tossed around. The guards look stony, determined, so Steve isn't too worried. He doesn't like the way Stark straightens his back, bracing for blows, though. It's not right. Stark's not alone anymore. He has a team.

Steve moves to Stark's other side, putting himself between Stark and the alpha who tried to molest him. It's easy to put his hand on Stark's back, slide his fingers up until they're buried in the soft, soft hair at the nape of Stark's neck. Steve's done this many times with the HC's omegas. It always brought them comfort.

Steve's not prepared for the sharp inhale of breath, the sudden flash of aroused omega hormones, the way Stark's body lets go the tension the way it had with his friends from school.

The woman's yelling something at Steve, but Steve isn't even listening. He's too absorbed in the transformation. How easily Stark changes direction with the lightest pressure of Steve's fingers, how his eyes are now soft, a little dazed. Steve doesn't take his hand away until they're at the limo. He has to let go to climb inside, but he's sure as hell planning to touch Stark again.

It's been a long time since he got such a strong reaction, and he may be old fashioned, but he's still an alpha, and he's only human. That was one hell of a yes. Stark will be beautiful in bed, and Steve's looking forward to hearing what other noises he can make, whether he'll argue as much in bed, what he'll do when Steve touches him other places, holds him down. It'll comfort Stark, too, because then he'll have an easier time at these things. Marked by a very dominant alpha, he'll carry that protection with him, like a second skin. Steve's glad he went to the party, now.

With his hand off Stark's neck, Stark climbs into the limo.

Steve politely waits a beat, lets Stark have a moment to choose where he'll sit. Then, ducking his head, Steve climbs inside.

Stark's not so much sitting on the seat, as braced against the other door, hand on the latch like he's thinking of getting out the other side and fleeing into the night. He's got his other hand up, palm out, a clear No.

One of the valets shuts the door behind Steve and the limo pulls away, so smooth Steve can barely feels the road under them.

Steve's not sure what's going on here. Stark must want a moment to compose himself. Maybe it's strange, being aroused in public? In Steve's day there was nothing shameful about an alpha playing a bit with his omega.

Stark's trembling again, and Steve can smell both arousal and a sweaty undercurrent of fear. From the woman, has to be. Steve would never hurt him.

"Don't do that," Stark says flatly. "Don't touch my neck like that again."

Steve's brows draw together. He clearly screwed up another modern social rule. "I'm sorry--is that not allowed anymore?"

"It's not dis-allowed, but it's not--" Stark shuts his eyes. He grimaces, and Steve thinks again that Stark looks ill. Not just tired, but under the weather. "Just *don't*, OK?"

"OK," Steve says. "I'm sorry. I don't get it. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"No, of course not, you're Captain fucking America and you just put your hand on the back of my fucking neck. In public. At the biggest party of the year. Jesus *Christ*."

Steve has no idea what the size of the party has to do with anything. "I'm sorry," he says again.

"God, I need a drink," Stark says. He rooting in the limo's bar.

"You've had too much alcohol already," Steve says, frowning.

Stark's hand freezes on the tiny bottle of scotch. Then he takes it and a bottle of ginger ale, a glass, some ice. He mixes his drink, hair falling in his eyes, the glass rattling because his hands are shaking. "I don't take orders from you."

"Right, I'm just the team leader. Excuse me for being confused about that."

Stark's eyes are dark brown, but they look bitter, sad, angry. "I'm not talking about the Avengers and you know it, Rogers."

Steve watches Stark mix his drink. He's taken a few long swallows, but he's not looking at Steve any more. The air in the small space is probably full of Steve's own arousal, which,

Steve realizes, is probably very rude.

"Should I roll the windows down?" Steve asks.

"I think I can handle it," Stark says, dry.

God, Stark is so, so--*mouthy*. Bratty. It should be annoying, it *is* annoying. But...

Stark raises one eyebrow, obviously smelling the sudden flush of Steve's further arousal, smirks at Steve over his glass. "I see."

"I doubt it." Steve sits back on the other side of the limo, far from Stark. He crosses his arms over his chest, which is stupid, but he can't help it. Steve stares out at the city they saved. He's trying very hard to remember that the omega across from him sacrificed his life for this city.

Stark sets his glass down. There's only ice left of course. "I think Fury's briefing on modern day cultural mores may have been lacking."

"No, really?" Even this late, the city is strung full of brilliant colorful lights. It's gorgeous.

Stark laughs softly. Steve shuts his eyes. He should roll down the windows. Definitely.

Just for a moment, Steve wishes the rules were the same today. That being the team leader meant he could just have Stark. That it would be understood. That when the limo draws up to the Stark House, Steve could slide his hand into Stark's hair, grip hard, and guide him to--wherever Steve wants him. That getting back after a mission would mean he could pour all his fury, all his loneliness, all his frustration and fear, into Stark's pliant body, and that Stark would just take it all, legs wrapped around him, bratty mouth as insulting as ever as Steve fucked into him. That afterwards, Steve could rub his spent come over Stark's swollen mouth, his bitten neck, proving to the whole world that Steve had one person to call his own instead being all alone in this damn century. And that Stark would be pleased, happy, if Steve arranged for Stark to spend an evening with Mel or Alex to relax him. That instead of whatever crude thing Stark must be thinking of him, that instead Stark would see him as an indulgent alpha, careful with his omegas, generous, gentle. That Stark would wear Steve's dog tags under his beautifully tailored shirts.

Right.

Might as well wish for a pony for Christmas.

"What are you thinking, snowdrop?"

Steve shuts his eyes. "You really don't want to know."

"I asked, didn't I?" Stark's face is lively, open, confident. Whatever happened before, Steve knows that's worn off. He's back to his old self. "Come on, try me. I'm unshockable. Ask TMZ."

Steve doesn't know who or what TMZ is, doesn't care. Sometimes he can't resist Stark's dares, though. "Fine. Back in my day, being made leader of the Avengers would mean you'd be in my bed."

Stark raises his eyebrows, sips the watery remains of his drink. "Sure. All omega poontang automatically goes to the alpha with the biggest dick. And?"

"And sometimes I miss those days, that's all." Steve looks back out at the city, smiles a little as he hears Stark choke a bit on his drink.

Steve's still looking at the lights, the glittering neon, the flashing signs, the window awash in gold even in the dark dark of night. This century is so loud, all the time. He's not expecting it when Stark speaks, but he should have.

"I guess you figure you've finally found a good use for my mouth."

Steve turns, looks at him. Drily he says, "Wasn't really thinking about your mouth. But since you brought it up, yes, I was wondering if you talk that much in bed."

Steve's expecting another sharp answer, is kind of looking forward to it. For all the selfish bravado, Stark's easy to talk to, because Steve doesn't have to hold back if he doesn't want to.

"No," Stark says, putting his glass down.

"Kind of having trouble imagining the great Tony Stark bereft of words unless he's been gagged," Steve says, trying to lighten whatever just happened.

"The penny drops at last," Stark says, sitting back, legs stretched out, arms over the seat back. It should be indolent, arrogant, lazy.

Steve just thinks Tony looks tired. "What, *really*?"

Stark raises his eyebrow, looking very amused now for some reason. "Of course. I'm a mouthy, selfish asshole plaything. First thing anyone's gonna do is gag me, Rogers, one way or another."

"People in this century are idiots," Steve says, slouching back in his own seat, disgusted. "Idiots."

Stark laughs. "But seriously, Rogers. I don't know what Fury's been giving you for intel, but you need a major upgrade."

Steve sighs. He does. "I hope I haven't done anything irreparable tonight. Um. Did I?"

Stark's looking at him seriously now, head cocked to one side.

Steve would fidget if it wasn't so undignified. Unable to keep still, he gets him a bottle of ginger ale.

"Why thank you." Stark opens the ginger ale, pours it into his glass without adding an extra whiskey.

"Earlier, in the hallway, with that woman. Should I not have taken her away?"

Stark looks up, mouth hidden behind the glass. He does that a lot, Steve notices, hides behind drinks, equipment, electonics. "You did the right thing, Captain, getting her off me." Stark sets the drink back down. Looks away, then, as if he can't help himself, right back at Steve. "But I meant what I said earlier. The neck. Don't do that again. You don't know what it means."

"I'm sorry," Steve says. He definitely messed something up there.

Yes, Steve's face is hot again, but Tony doesn't make a crack about him blushing. "You're fine, Rogers. I was going to say it's not a big deal, but I'm guessing you wouldn't believe me."

"You guess right."

"It's an aphrodisiac, OK? A strong one." Stark toys with the glass, swirling the melted ice around and around. "Like, oh, I don't know. What's the strongest impulse you alphas get, smelling a mating heat?"

"Protect," Steve says, shaking his head. "A mating heat scent is strong, but a bonded omega's blood, fear scent, anything like that." Steve can barely remember some of the stuff the Commandos got up to when Ezra was hurt.

"Interesting. Well, I wouldn't know about that. Does it override your frontal thinking brain?"

Steve smiles grimly. "Yes and no. I can strategize, hunt, fight. But talking's beyond me."

"There you go then." Tony raises his glass in a salute.

"Wait, are you saying that touching your neck is like *that*? That when that woman, that's why you just went still, why you smelled--" Like arousal and fear. Steve feels sick to his stomach.

"It's exactly like that."

"But the omegas I knew weren't like that." Or, not exactly. If you touched Ezra right above the hip bone, skin on skin, it was kind of like that. He'd go pliant, soft, lazy.

"No." Stark looks out his own windows, letting the city pass. When he looks back, his eyes are hooded. "Different omegas have different erogonous zones. Low back, bellies, wrists, inside of the elbow, hip bones. Different omegas respond differently to being touched there. Arousal, suggestability, aggression, passivity. We're just a lovely pick n mix selection of quirks. What did Fury's materials tell you, anyhow?"

Steve tips his head back against the back seat of the limo. No wonder Tony had just gone wherever Steve's hand directed him. Also, no wonder he'd thought about climbing right back

out the other door as soon as Steve's hand dropped. It must have taken a lot of courage to *stay*. It's embarrassing how often Steve misjudges Stark. "Oh, you know, relations between the types have changed and matured. Relationships vary depending on how the participants prefer. Some religions have more liberal attitudes towards non-omega produced children, other religions are more strict. Scientific evidence strongly suggests that traditional omega-born children are far healthier.. The world is full of diverse cultures and approaches to relationships. America is an exciting melting pot that embraces the strengths of each of the types."

"So, lots of government BS, not much practical value."

"Yeah. There was some fairy dust sprinkled in there, too, I'm pretty sure."

Tony smiles, fast and sharp. "I'm sure. So no mentions of no fly zones."

Steve shakes his head. "I'm really sorry. In my day--it's not my day. I'm sorry."

"No, tell me, I'm curious."

It's only fair, even if Stark makes fun after. "In my day, holding the back of an omega's neck was a way for an alpha to show support. Protection."

"Are you telling me a neck grab wasn't sexual in your day?" Tony seems disbelieving in that 'are you really that big an idiot' sort of way he has.

"Anything can be sexual. But no, it usually wasn't meant sexually. I'm sorry. When you responded like that, I just--"

Tony waves his hand. "Whatever. I'm used to it."

"I thought you said people are more aware of these erogenous zones nowadays," Steve says slowly.

"They are."

"That it's rude to touch an omega there. Especially without prior permission."

"I'm telling you it's rude, Rogers. I'm not telling you people don't do it."

Steve eyes him, but Tony seems perfectly serious, even amused. "I bet if we turned the limo around, that woman in the dress would still be there."

"And?" Tony asks, like this is a major digression he's not expecting.

"Well, don't you want to press charges?"

Now both Tony's eyebrows are up. "Rogers, you are something else. If I pressed charges on every putz who got handsy with me, I'd never get any work done."

"But she--you said it makes you--you know!" It's just *wrong*. "It's a violation of your sanctity as a person!"

Tony just shakes his head, like Steve's the one who's nuts. "Clearly, you are not living my life. That's sweet, Cap, but I've dealt with worse. Will deal with worse tomorrow."

"But doesn't it bother you?"

"Whether it bothers me or not has virtually no impact on whether it will happen." Tony's voice is calm, flat, a statement of fact.

Steve decides he's going to think about that later, when he can really digest it. At the moment, he'd just flail and be horrified. Maybe a change of subject is better, "I wonder if I could ask you a question. About your friend, Alex."

"Oh, sure." Tony seems relieved over the subject change.

"I saw he was married. Wore a ring. But he smelled unclaimed. Do people not always bond their omegas anymore?" Steve kind of likes Photoshop, but otherwise, as far as he can tell this century is pure shit.

"Jesus Christ, the least Fury could do is print off a Wikipedia page. OK, no. First, some omegas can't bond at all. Various reasons. Maybe they've been raped, maybe they're a null line, whatever. So, could always be that."

Steve frowns. "OK, but it isn't."

"Nope. Alex married an omega." Tony raises his ginger ale in salute. "So, no bond." He's casual, sipping like it's champagne, but there's something under the brittle smile.

"Oh, is he married to Mel?" Steve asks.

Tony pauses. "No. Not Mel. Why do you ask?"

"It's just--she's beautiful, they're friends, he's a CEO, she's-" Steve is blushing again so he shuts up. Only Tony Stark.

But he hasn't said the wrong thing, because Tony's smiling a sharp shark smile that Steve's seen a few times in battle. Tony's pleased about something, and it's going to be trouble for someone. Steve is certain. "She's taken, Rogers. Alex is married to Terrence Delano, who is even more smoking hot than Mel." Tony's smile sharpens. "You don't seem bothered by it."

"Why would I be?"

"People sometimes are. It's not legal in many states."

Steve just shrugs. "Love's rare enough. If you can find it, hold onto it."

"I'll drink to that," Stark says, and does.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

> OK folks, I am off to Laguardia. I wanted to say two quick things: 1, I have the best readers ever. Thank you all so much for your fantastic and thoughtful comments! 2, I'm going to post some information on A/B/O biology, reproduction, social rules, etc, as the next chapter. Selections from Steve's reading material, provided by Tony. That post should go up later tonight or tomorrow.

The next day, when Steve opens his door, he finds a stack of books. On top is a note in Stark's tidy draftsman's hand, written in pencil, a very soft lead (3B at least), but the letters are light. Stark has a very delicate hand.

Steve picks it up.

"This should get you started. I thought you might prefer the paper books over electronic, but I have also sent both e-books and several videos to your StarkTablet. You might find ch 13 of the top one of particular interest, as well as chs 4 and 7 of the third book. ~AES"

Steve picks up the stack and hauls it inside. The book on top is *Our Omega Bodies Adult Unabridged Edition*. The next book is *A Short History of Modern Marriage*. The third is the *Joy of O: A Delicious Exploration of Omegas*. There's more after that, about biology, history, cultural variations.

Steve really should start with the first book. It's heavy, thorough, authoritative. He grabs the Joy of O and sits down on his bed. It has a flowery cover, but it's a large book, like the thick art books Stark has filled Steve's shelves with already.

Steve knows what he will find inside. It will be pinups, because that's what Stark would find both funny and practical.

He turns the cover. It isn't pinups. Or, not exactly. It's a book of photographs, lovingly taken, of omegas having sex. To titillate, yes, but there are also some that illustrate positions, diagrams of where to touch, advice on where to buy supplies, discussions to have with your omega. Steve swallows. Well.

Steve flips slowly through the first couple of chapters. He stops at one striking photo, taken in natural light, of an omega on their knees, back bowed, legs spread. It's certainly arousing.

Some things are universal. Steve could imagine the Commandos sharing a dirty book with a photo like this, although the colors of the printing are much better now.

Curious, he flips to Chapter 4.

Oh.

The omega's eyes are shut, her mouth open but soft, and her face has that same transcendental quality that Stark's had taken on. A hand, male by the look of it, is gripping the nape of her neck, and she's leaning into the touch, back bowed.

There are more photos. Touches to ankles, hands gripping wrists, fingers spread over hipbones. The charts are interesting, Steve thinks. There are dialogs to have with your omega lover about whether erogonous zone play is too much, how to find it if you aren't sure, ways to enjoy it, options to explore. Different omega lines often have different arousal zones and responses. There's a helpful chart.

Steve stares at another picture for a long time. An alpha has just come on his omega, and the photo shows the alpha's broad hand rubbing the semen into the omega's neck. This omega, who has dark brown hair, but not Tony's brown eyes, looks blissed out. His mouth is open and his pupils are blown wide, obviously aroused and very submissive. The photo is part of a series on Erotic Marking Play and erogonous zones.

Steve has to close his eyes for a moment, and then he adjusts himself in his underwear.

With a shaking hand, Steve flips forward. The next chapters are just as explicit, but Steve doesn't linger. When he gets to chapter 7, he frowns.

Gags and Mouth-Ties.

The opening photo is of a female omega, eyes shut, dark hair spilling down her back, mouth held open with a large rubber ball held in place with a heavy black leather tie.

Steve pages slowly through the photos. They aren't wrong, he knows that. It's different, modern, but none of the omegas are hurt or unhappy. It just doesn't--Steve just doesn't like it, that's all.

The next photo is a two page spread. An omega, on hands and knees. This is a couple shot, and the omega is being taken from behind with obvious enjoyment. Steve holds the paper carefully, trying not to crumple it. The omega's gag in front is the wide o-ring type he'd seen earlier, the kind that props a mouth open and holds it wide, for easy sexual use.

With a sick swoop to his stomach, Steve is sure that someone, some time, maybe many times, had shoved that cold steel between Tony's teeth, tied the gag on, and then fucked his mouth as often and as hard as they wanted.

"You've finally found a good use for my mouth," Steve remembers Tony telling him, as if it was the obvious, *natural* thing to do to him. As if it was *right*.

Steve takes a piece of paper from the pad on his desk. In his own careful copperplate hand, he writes, "Stark, Thank you very much for the books. I am already learning a great deal of useful and helpful information. As to your suggestion, I quite enjoyed ch 4, but I'm afraid I

did not care for ch 7. Sincerely, Steven Rogers" Steve bites his lip, debates with himself, and adds, "especially liked plate on p.89" to the part about ch 4. It's pushy, it's obnoxious, it's probably what SHIELD's therapist perkily calls 'too much information', but Steve just wants Stark to know how hot he found that photo of the alpha rubbing come on that omega's neck.

Steve puts the letter aside. He'll deliver it when he gets breakfast.

In the meantime, he slides back under the covers and shuts his eyes. The whole book was full of gorgeous omegas in technicolor, splayed out for an alpha's pleasure. Lots of the soldiers Steve knew in the army, not to mention Bucky, weren't all that picky about types. They'd enjoy a nice beta girl just fine.

Steve had been an alpha before the change, no matter what the press liked to think. He'd always had a strong preference for omegas, even if he'd never managed to catch one's eye. By the time he'd joined the War, he'd told himself that life was too short to go without love.

Peggy, beautiful competent beta Peggy, would have made a swell wife. Steve thought dating her would have been wonderful. If things worked out, with both their incomes, they could have married, and in time, found an omega to bear their children, keep their home, and yes, Steve thought, warm their bed. An omega at home would have freed Peggy from worrying about it, would have let her pursue her career just fine. Steve never would have expected her to stop working, it wouldn't have been right.

So, even back then, he'd known his preferences. His time with the Commandos had....clarified them. Yes, that's one of the words the book had used. "It's useful to understand yourself and then clarify your preferences."

Steve, well, Steve's preference was, *is*, for omegas. Unbonded, beautiful, fierce, pushy, mouthy omegas.

He slides a hand under his sweatpants and palms his dick. He's been hard for a while, looking at those pictures. It's impossible not to imagine Tony Stark in each of those poses. Head hanging down, back arched to push his ass up, legs spread, wet and ready. Or naked, kneeling, eyes drifting closed as his neck is caressed again and again.

Steve gives his dick a few long pulls. There had been a photo early on of an omega in the section on submission. The omega was on all fours, being fucked by their alpha from behind. It wasn't the position that had caught Steve's attention, but the dark marks on the omega's shoulder, neck, and thigh. Bite marks from their alpha.

He wants that.

He wants to hold Tony down, slide deep inside, and fuck Tony while Tony talks. Of whatever. Electronics, physics, strategy, fashion. Steve is sure Tony could rant about sex as easily as breathing, too, and he wants to hear it. Steve wants to hear it, and he wants to bite Tony's shoulder, and he wants to come inside him, but even more, Steve wants to come, good and hard, and then take his spent seed and rub it into Tony's neck, over and over in slow soothing strokes, until Tony's eyes go glassy and his body is relaxed and pliant, until he's dazed with sex and smelling owned.

Steve bites his lip and comes hard, hand wrapped tight around his dick, other hand covering it so he won't mess the sheets.

God, yes, he wants that. And when Tony is aroused and sleepy and utterly pliant, smelling of Steve's sex, Steve wants to roll him over and have him again, gentle and slow, kissing the taste of himself from Tony's neck, while Tony murmurs about god only knows what--probably circuit boards.

Steve grabs for the kleenex.

It's the sort of fantasy that would probably get Captain America shot.

Chapter 28: Interlude 3

Chapter Summary

An Introduction to Modern Omegas

Chapter Notes

Snippets gathered from various websites by A.E.S. for S.R. Printed on hardcopy and stuck between the fifth and sixth books.

[Cut and pasted from various websites and then printed on hardcopy.]

Why Three Types?

Thousands of years ago, a severe plague attacked the human race. Similar to the bubonic plague, most people who got sick died, but a handful recovered. Omegas (and alphas) were a semi-magic-induced mutation attached to the people who survived.

The original plague is gone, but some (similar) significant infectious diseases remain. Other serious inheritable conditions are also present. Despite modern medical advances, health problems are still very much a societal concern.

All omegas have natural inherent disease resistance (to nearly everything). Omegas do not have genetically inherited diseases.

Betas and alphas may or may not have natural disease resistence depending on their parentage.

1. Omegas pass on their healthy traits to their offspring. An omega's kids are healthy, even if their kids are betas or alphas.

2. Omegas are a small percentage of the population. Approximately 3-12%, depending on locale. This low percentage continues through generations.

3. Alphas are also a small percentage of the population. Approximately 8-22%, again depending on locale. Alphas can be male or female. Alphas have some natural disease resistance which comes from the *alpha* side of their genetic heritage. Alphas have additional strength, primal instincts, and drives. They tend to live less long than both omegas and betas (often because they are in high-risk jobs).

4. Betas are the most common type of all. They are generally considered (by society) to be level-headed and less affected by hormones. Betas can be male or female.

Omega sexuality and reproduction

Unlike betas and alphas, omegas are not strictly male or female. Omegas are a third sex, but there are some variations in their anatomy. Many omegas have three sets of sexual organs--male (a penis and balls), female (ovaries and uterus but not vagina), and omega (a channel similar but different from a vagina that leads to a set of very complex internal organs where embryo creation takes place).

When a beta male mates with a beta female, the beta male ejaculates his sperm into the female's vagina. The sperm swim to the fallopian tubes where they find an egg. The fertilized egg moves to the uterus, where it sticks to the wall and becomes a fetus.

Omega bodies handle things quite differently, both for siring and for bearing.

Think of it like this: in the wider natural world, some species are parthenogenic. (They can get pregnant without ever having sex; their bodies can create a viable embryo on its own.) Omegas aren't strictly parthenogenic, but it's similarly complex.

Let's say a single male beta has sex with an omega. The male beta ejaculates sperm into the omega, and the omega's omega internal organs combine the male's DNA (from sperm) with their own DNA in a complex fashion, patching any problems spots with the omega's DNA. (This is why an omega's children may more closely resemble the omega parent.) The omega can then implant that embryo inside themselves and bear it as a child.

However, if during heat, that same omega also has sex with a female beta, the omega may combine three sets of DNA to create an embryo. The child would have DNA from three parents, and the omega's body would have swapped various strands of DNA around depending on their body's instinct as to which DNA was healthiest.

An omega having sex with (say) a married couple can either sire a child (on a female partner) or be impregnanted by the married couple. The omega can either bear those embryos themselves (in their uterus) OR implant those embyros in another female body (in the female's uterus after penetrative sex).

Doing this kind of complex reproductive chemistry is very taxing on a body, so omegas can *only* during this during heat. Omega bodies go through various changes to prepare for and recover from heat; up to three thousand additional calories per day are required. It is common for omegas to lose weight during extended heats.

Omega heats are multi-day affairs to make it easier to combine multi-partner DNA. It may take several sex acts to acquire the DNA, then more while the DNA is being combined, and then more sex acts to properly implant the embryo.

Given the impact of genetic type on the health of children, there are a LOT of social rules about type when it comes to marriage and reproduction.

To review:

Omega + beta = healthy kids

Omega + alpha = healthy kids

Omega + couple (of any type) = healthy kids

Alpha + Alpha = probably healthy (about 60% chance), but an unlikely pairing given sexual preferences

Alpha + Beta (no omega present) = 40% chance healthy kids

Beta + Beta (no omega present) = 25% *or lower* chance healthy kids

Omegas are a tiny percentage of the population (usually about 8%). They are the *only* way to assure healthy children. Omega sexuality is thus highly socially controlled.

Sexual preferences

Alphas

Alphas are more common than omegas, but less common than betas.

Alphas may be male or female. Male alphas can knot.

Alphas (of both genders) have a *strong* sexual preference for omegas. They can bond permanently to omegas. If they have the power/prestige/strength to do so, most alphas will try to find a virgin omega and claim them.

While it's considered a bit greedy, some alphas will claim/marry multiple omegas. This is perfectly legal in most societies.

If an alpha doesn't have a personal omega mate, they may arrange with an omega's family to temporarily marry an omega for a season or two, to have children. Such marriages are called contract marriages.

Given the scarcity of omegas, most alphas marry betas. These alpha-beta couples again will often arrange to have an omega for a season or two to bear/sire their children. Given that most alphas do not find betas sexually attractive, such marriages are often more friendship based than sexual.

Most alphas do not find other alphas sexually attractive. While not taboo, alpha-alpha pairings are not very common.

Sometimes, Alphas will marry a beta, and then, after pooling their resources, the married couple will acquire a permanent omega via marriage. Many omegas who have previously been contracted out short-term will wind up in such a marriage. Often, the omega becomes the stay at home parent, while their two spouses work outside the home.

Betas

Betas are the most common type. Betas usually marry each other or an alpha. Bonds between betas, or between a beta and an alpha, are possible, but unusual. When bonds occur, it usually happens when an omega is temporarily present. (This is another reason a married couple might contract an omega.)

Betas enjoy omega sex, but they do not find omegas sexually arousing to the extent that alphas do. Betas are more even keeled, and their sexuality is more based on gender preferences.

Omegas

Omegas may present as male or female in gender. There are some varations in omegas, but most omegas have both male and female organs. Thus most male and female omegas can bear or sire children.

Omega sexual preferences are not well-understood. It is believed that the most extreme omegas (those who have all three sets of sexual organs and who have the slightly more androgynous body type) have a strong sexual preference for alphas. Other research indicates that some extreme omegas in fact prefer other omegas.

During heat, an omega's sexual preferences are usually more extreme. While old wives tales say that an omega in heat will enjoy sex with anyone, research indicates the exact opposite. Most omegas during heat have strong preferences in person, gender, type, activity, etc. Modern reproductive studies indicate that positive sexual experiences help extend the heat, which is necessary for proper omega reproduction to occur. The old wives tale that the longer the heat the healthier the baby appears to be true.

Social Pressures on Omegas:

1. The sort of 50s unconscious standard is for an omega to be wooed by a single alpha. The omega would be a virgin until mating with their alpha. They would then go on to focus on children and their alpha. An omega might be encouraged to attend college--to get a degree in early childhood development and/or meet promising young up-and-coming alphas of good family. A young omega and an older alpha pairing is common.

2. A series of temporary marriages, either with appropriate alphas or with married couples. Society would prefer this to be arranged by the omega's family. Usually, an omega would either return back to their family home (occasionally taking up a career after having several children) or they might choose to stay with one of their marriage-partner couples to be part of that family.

3. A series of temporary marriages/serious but outside wedlock sex partners chosen by the omega themselves. Society considers this pretty wild-child. Much like living together outside wedlock was in the sixties/seventies, or celebrity Vegas weddings are today. Often blamed upon omega supposed voracious sexual appetites.

4. Casual sex by omegas outside marriage is considered fairly sleazy.

5. Any omega who is trapped into mating during heat is under considerable pressure to marry that alpha. An omega who is bonded by that alpha (or couple) is even more pressured. (In the past it was considered an automatic marriage.) However, there is also considerable opposite pressure against alphas to 'not steal the omegas' by using underhanded means.

6. Lastly, omegas may have sex *with other omegas* for sexual experimentation, blowing off steam, youthful hijinks, etc. This is not considered 'real' sex, and (for complicated reasons) does not usually produce children. Permanent omega-omega pairings are considered deeply weird by society. (Loved ones will occasionally helpfully suggest that the two could find 'real' love if they found 'the right alpha' together, or assume that one or both of the omegas had a bad past experience with a heat, etc.) When an alpha has more than one omega, however, no one thinks anything of it if two of the omegas pair off. Then the two omegas are just 'special friends', and will be considered a couple.

7. Practically speaking, omegas can be used like pawns by their families. Omegas can be permanently married off to cement alliances. Omegas can be lent out for money, jobs, prestige, connections.

8. Many advanced colleges will not admit omega students whatsoever, on the grounds that they are too distracting to serious academic study. Some careers, such as police, military, or emergency medicine, are not legal for omegas. Omegas may own property, but that property in many states is ceded over to a permanent partner if an omega marries. Omegas rarely have visitation rights to children sired or born via contract marriage. There are some careers, such as early childcare, that omegas are considered suitable for.

About that pesky heat

Omega bodies are extremely complicated. Outside heat, omegas can have sex but the sex is not especially fertile (much less fertile than a comparable beta-human would be). Since combining DNA in their bellies takes a ton of physical energy, omegas do this only during heat.

Various factors impact how often an omega goes into heat. A healthy omega living a low-stress life who has access to a positive relationship with a loving partner will go into heat as often as monthly. An omega living a high-stress life with limited access to food/rest may go into heat only two or three times a year; sometimes, an omega’s body will go into unpredictable and frequent heats (every two weeks).

Like beta human females, omega bodies can sometimes get off cycle. One possible consequence of high-stress is half-heats, where the omega's body tries to move into heat but

cannot complete the physical changes in their sexual organs that make it possible. This draws all the energy of a regular heat but instead of dissipating can sometimes snowball into additional hormone-related side effects: dizziness, rapid heart-beat, fever, adrenaline or thyroid problems, etc.

During heat, omegas are sexually aroused pretty much all the time. They give off powerful sexual pheromones. The chemicals in their body include disinhibitors, so omegas are more suggestible/easy to control than other times. Despite these disinhibitors, an omega will usually feel their actual preferences more keenly.

Omegas have powerful bonding capability during heat. It's something of a survival mechanism--an omega bonded to their sexual partner is more likely to be taken care of if their partner feels sad every time the omega is in pain or unhappy.

Social Expectations

Omegas are, according to society, nurturers and caretakers. They might be considered good at finance--if your idea of finance is managing the family checkbook or planning for the kids' college educations. They're usually considered attractive and charming, and great pressure is put on their appearance (to be sexy or sweetly parental, depending). They can get an education, own property, or run businesses, but it's considered a precursor to their 'real' career. Young omegas who insist on going to college to get a serious degree or who get a serious job are often considered charmingly 'rebellious' or 'plucky'.

Additional mores and taboos:

Omega heat suppressants exist. They're considered fine for 'good omegas' to use to help time heats for family planning. Using them longterm can be unsafe. Using them to essentially stop being an omega and/or have non-heat sex is frowned on, a lot. It can also cause damage to internal organs.

Omega heat inducers also exist. Alphas found to induce a heat in an omega are considered scum; family/spouses/omegas can legally murder any alpha who uses one. There are some limited legitimate medical uses for these medications.

Many families protect their young omegas so that wandering alphas do not take advantage. (Sometimes this is done in a happy way, sometimes in a creepy way.)

An alpha who wants to 'move up' in society can seduce and bond an omega from a wealthy/influencial family. An omega who wants to move up could find a socially powerful alpha. Families and society are given to the usual mercurial societal whims about which side got the better bargain.

Most medications used on alphas/betas do not work the same way on omegas. Sometimes with dangerous results. Omega medicine is therefore a highly specialized area of medicine.

Na = Unmarried omega. The equivalent of Miss.

Sa= Married omega. The equivalent of Mrs or Mr

Omegas are not differentiated by gender, but by marital status. Make of that what you will.

[From The Omega Alliance website]

An Introduction to Alphas

Alphas make up approximately 12% of the population. While alphas are fine humans, they are subject to certain hormonal influences.

Positives: increased reaction times, improved sight/smell/hearing, ability to bond, passionate feelings that can drive them to succeed.

Challenges: possessive instinct, status awareness, quick to react, dominance.

In healthy communities, alphas make excellent partners and friends. In times of crisis, an alpha family member can be capable of great loyalty and bravery, often risking themselves for loved ones.

However, if difficulties go on for a long time, alphas can experience hormonal stress that leads to increased pack behavior. This can include the notorious Fight instinct (useful in times of actual crisis but to be avoided in most situations), overly controlling behavior, and depression.

Health experts recommend that all alphas in longterm leadership positions have one or more omegas mates to help regulate their hormones and emotions.

An alpha who is engaging in a courtship of an omega may engage in unexpected risk-taking, possessive displays, increased anger, and may have difficulties at work or getting along with others.

Career Options for Omegas

Omegas are banned from: Armed forces combat, FBI, CIA, and high-level positions in high-risk industries (finance, insurance, weapons, truck-driving, law, medicine).

Omegas have made strides in: elementary teaching, nursing, clothing retail/fashion, modeling, entertainment, nutrition and food industries, child care, and art.

[neatly printed at the bottom:

Hope this helps you get started. ~AES

Chapter 29

Tony's never had to work so hard in his life. All of Iron Man's previous work has been overseas. He's busted up fights on most of the continents, sure, but this is different. New York is Tony's city. He's not looking at crumpled up buildings and shattered roads and smashed infrastructure in some town like Gulmira. This is home.

He swipes his arm against his face to get the sweat out of his eyes. "Try it now, Aliana."

Na Anderson's competent assistant pushes the lever on the remote. There's a grinding noise, but the giant carcass that Tony's standing on doesn't even shift.

"All stop," Tony calls to her. He scrambles down from his perch. Aliana's wearing a bright blue Stark Industries hard-hat and white hazmat suit, just in case. She ditched the hood part early on, and Tony can't blame her. It's hot work in the sun.

"Na Stark, I think the skeleton's deeper than we thought." She's reading something off a tablet. It's a sonar thing that archaeologists use in the Badlands to check for dino bones, and Tony had it sent over just this morning.

Tony reads over her shoulder. "Yeah. See that line there? I wonder if that's a vein."

Aliana taps at the tablet with quick fingers. "Let's try it with a different calibration."

Tony's watching the screen, but he feels the air shift a bit, catches a hint of summer breeze smell. "Captain."

"Na Stark." Captain Rogers steps closer, and Aliana tenses.

Tony places a hand on her low back, reassuring, before he turns and places himself between the young omega and Cap. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to see how the reconstruction was coming along."

"It's more like deconstruction at the moment." Tony swipes at his face with his shirt-sleeve again. Cap's eyes flicker. Fuck, he's probably got dead alien goo in his beard again. "We're trying to divide the carcass into easily moveable pieces, but the stupid fucking thing is resisting."

"Tony, language!"

Aliana laughs, still not turning around. "I know what fucking means, Captain Rogers."

Tony grins at her. "Learned at our mama's knee, no doubt. But seriously, Cap, we've got this."

Steve steps closer, trying to look non-threatening. "May I see?"

Tony glances at Aliana. She's gorgeous, all long limbs and youth, very feminine. Her hair is honey brown, her eyes a deep green, perfect straight nose. Tony knows she's never been contracted out, despite being eighteen. Her family is very protective, and somehow, Na Anderson has gotten her accepted to one of the city colleges.

Before Tony can say anything, Aliana steps out of the way, making space for Steve. "It's just a sonar picture of the skeleton," she says.

Steve takes the tablet and reads it carefully. His hands dwarf the thing. Next to both Aliana and Tony, Steve is very tall. "This is really neat."

"It was Na Stark's idea," she says earnestly.

Steve looks at her, and Tony wonders what he's thinking. Out of the corner of his eye, Tony sees the small flock of school chaperones assigned to them glide closer. Steve must see it, too. He looks up, sees who they are. Steve turns to Tony.

Tony expects a 'But I would never' speech, since this is Captain America. If you can't trust the good Captain, who can you trust? The guy punched Hitler. "Have you met Aliana Martin, Captain?"

"It's a pleasure, Na Martin."

Aliana ducks her head, shy, eyes downcast. "The pleasure is all mine, Captain Rogers."

Yes, Miss Price does instill the best manners. "Aliana, can you tell Na Anderson that the exo isn't responding to the latest batch?"

"Yes, Na Stark."

"Ask her for the third acid solution for our next test run, OK?"

"Yes, Na Stark." Aliana nods to Steve, flashes her smile at Tony, and leaves.

Once she's gone, Steve frowns at Tony. "That wasn't very nice. You shouldn't have just sent her away."

"She's a virgin, Rogers."

"Tony!"

Tony rolls his eyes. "I meant, part of my promise in keeping her safe here is to make sure she doesn't spend any time with an alpha unchaperoned. The work crews have to keep a ten yard distance at all times. She's a virgin and she's sheltered. The rules are a little stricter than you'll have been used to."

Steve clutches the tablet like it's protecting his own virtue. "I would never--she's so young."

"A lot older than me when your dear friend Howard--" Tony clamps down on it. "Never mind. We're working on breaking the carcass into chunks that a crane can lift. At the moment, we're dropping acid-based charges into holes we've drilled, letting the acid break up the lizard meat, then sort of hauling it out by big ass crane."

Steve sets the tablet back down. "You went to the same boarding school that Na Martin attends?"

"Yeah." Tony takes the tablet and fiddles with it. He punches in a few new combinations, taps his ear piece. "Na Anderson, we're going to try injecting a solution into a vein. Got to be worth a shot."

"Yes, Aliana's here, she mentioned finding one. She said Captain Rogers is visiting. Put us on speakerphone, please."

Fuck. Tony wishes to death that he could claim the workstation's speakerphone was busted, but since Tony installed it himself, she'd never believe it. Tony flips the switches and yanks off his bluetooth.

"Good afternoon, Captain Rogers."

Steve jumps, which is pretty funny. "Who's that?"

"My name is Na Anderson, Captain. Na Stark has put me in charge of alien body removal within the city limits. How are you this afternoon, Captain?"

"I'm very well, Na Anderson, thank you." Steve looks thrilled, as always, to meet someone. Steve is so nice sometimes that Tony's teeth ache from the contact sugar high. "Tony's been telling me a bit about you."

Tony scowls at the web cam, knowing she can see him. "I haven't told him anything."

"Now, Na Stark," she says.

There's a distant rumble that Tony can feel right through his work books. "Who set off a charge? I didn't authorize any charges!"

"That's probably Peter. He was going to try something new on the right foreleg."

"Fuck," Tony says, already scrambling down the ladder they've got attached the carcass.

"Don't forget your hard hat," she calls.

Tony swears, turns, bolts back up the ladder, grabs the damn thing before he can get any more of a lecture. "Don't eat Rogers."

"I don't know what you mean, Na Stark," she says.

Yeah, right.

Tony slaps the hat on his head and races down the ladder, jumping the last few rungs. Peter's a good kid, but he's a little confused on the concept of how much C4 is enough and how much is too much. Tony does see any flames or any flying lizard chunks, so hopefully it's not too bad. Peter's timing leaves a lot to be desired.

*

"So, Captain Rogers, I wondered if you'd be so good as to help me with some of my tests today, if it's not any trouble."

Steve is watching Tony's retreating form. He's dodging through the crowd, one hand pressed to his ear, talking a mile a minute. Everyone is making way for him, even the hardened laborers. From up here, it's easier to see how small he is. Well-muscled, beautifully proportioned, but slighter. An omega.

"Shouldn't I go with Tony?" Steve asks. He can run fast, but he didn't want to in case he was in the way.

It's the right call, because she says soothingly, "No, Captain. Na Stark will find it easier to help Peter if he's alone. He won't want to correct Peter in front of anyone else. Peter's a little sensitive."

"Oh of course," Steve says, because that makes sense. It's bad form to correct underlings in front of a superior, and naturally Tony would be extra-careful with someone who was so sensitive by nature.

"I'm sure you have a very full plate," Na Anderson says apologetically, "but I would dearly love to make progress on this task. It's just that I need a second set of hands--one up on the carcass while I'm down here in my lab. Since you can't assist me, I wonder if you wouldn't mind asking one of the fellows in the hard hats to come up. They won't be as precise as you, but we all do what we must."

Steve immediately sits down in the chair. "Gosh, I'm sorry. I'd love to help. I just thought you'd need someone with tech skills. I'm not real good with technology."

"I'm sure you're just fine," she says soothingly. "I'll walk you through everything. Do you see that green lever?"

Sure enough, there's a green lever attached to a large flat box. There's also several other colored levers, dials, and switches. "Yes."

"Just flip that for me."

Steve does it, careful to make sure he touches nothing else. "OK. What next?"

"We let the test cycle through. It takes several minutes, I'm afraid."

Steve doesn't have anything better to do, so he doesn't mind and says so.

"That's very kind of you, Captain. Na Stark mentioned that you're staying in Stark House. How are you finding it?"

"It's beautiful," Steve says honestly. Still overly modern, and you never really knew who you'd find in the living room, but beautiful. "Na Stark has been very kind to all of us."

"So you enjoy staying there?"

"I do," Steve says. "It's a nice change from the military." Or the small empty apartment that SHIELD gave him. Steve appreciated their thought, but he'd been unable to sleep there. He'd never lived alone in his whole life. Most of the time, he shared beds or floors with other kids, family, teammates, buddies. Sometimes, Steve had wished for a home all his own, but SHIELD's empty stale apartment had been a penance, not a pleasure. Stark House with Jarvis and Barton and Tony and Natasha and a revolving door of odd visitors is much better.

"I'm surprised the Army let you off base, given your strategic importance."

"I'm on assignment to SHIELD indefinitely, so the Army didn't get a say." Usually, Steve isn't much for talking, but Na Anderson is a good listener. He can see why Tony kept in touch.

She asks him about the world, what he likes now (all the new foods, soft knit tee shirts, Photoshop, his bike, health insurance) and what he doesn't like (reality TV, aliens, modern tooth paste).

"What don't you like about that?"

"I don't mind brushing my teeth," Steve says hastily. "It's just that it's so foamy. I got too much on my toothbrush, and I ended up looking like a rabid dog. It took forever to rinse my mouth."

Na Anderson doesn't laugh. She's much too kind. "Tell Tony. They still make tooth powder, or he can get you plain baking soda."

"I wouldn't want to put him to any trouble. He's done so much for us."

"Trust me, Captain. Na Stark enjoys being put to trouble. If people don't ask him to do things for them, he ends up inventing his own tasks. You don't want that, believe me. It ends up with exploding soccer fields."

Steve can just see a tiny determined Tony blowing things up when other kids were probably making mud pies. "I bet he was a cute kid."

Na Anderson laughs. "You have no idea. Huge brown eyes, brilliant mind, fast talker. Lean over to your left screen."

Steve obeys. A picture of Tony appears. He's small, maybe nine or ten, wearing a grubby shirt that's more engine-grease black than any color. His face is speckled with something suspiciously soot-like, and a long brown curl dangles in his eyes. Tony's hugging something

metallic and sort of rectangular that looks oddly familiar. His smile is huge, eyes dancing, just happy.

"When was this taken?" Steve asks. His heart is in his throat. This isn't posed. A family photo of some kind.

"His tenth birthday. His parents were going to come, but they cancelled. I taught him how to use the forge."

"That metal thing--he's got that in the living room."

"It was supposed to be a lamp. Or a go-cart. He couldn't decide." Her voice is fond. "So we made it both. A lamp on wheels."

Steve thinks of his own birthdays. While she was alive, his mom always made it special, even if it was spending a day at the zoo to draw the tigers. "It's in the living room. I use it as a reading lamp. How come his folks didn't come?"

She snorts.

Steve frowns.

Before he can say anything, maybe change the subject, she says, "Tony tells me you knew Howard."

"I did," Steve says cautiously.

"Did you know him well?"

"I thought so." Tony's comment about his father sending him to be married younger than Aliana makes Steve wonder, though.

"Hmm," she says, but then she starts telling him about Tony's eleventh birthday. They'd had a volcano shaped cake and red lava icing exploded out of the top. His friend Alex had designed the icing, and it had spattered everywhere.

The picture of Tony with his arms around a laughing Alex shows them both liberally sprinkled with drops of pink fluff.

Steve flips switches for her every now again, and sometimes he has to adjust dials very carefully, but mostly they sit and talk. About the world, about art, about history, and about Tony.

When Na Anderson is regaling him with a story about Tony making a remote controlled plane big enough to fly the youngest kids' Barbie dolls (he only allowed one doll-pilot to perish valiantly in the test trials before using specially weighted dixie cups instead), Steve realizes that none of her extensive stories involve Howard or Maria. Tony was at school over summer months, over Christmas, over Thanksgiving, over his birthdays. Steve's seen the many (adorable) pictures of Tony in tee shirt, jeans, and sneakers to prove it.

"I'm glad he had you," Steve says suddenly, interrupting the bit about Tony making some kind of elaborate crane to get the plane out of a huge oak.

"Beg pardon?"

"Tony. I'm glad he had you. That you were there for him."

There's a little pause where Steve's not sure if he overstepped.

"Thank you, Captain Rogers. But honestly, it's easy, caring for Tony. He has a big heart."

Steve looks at the picture of a teenaged Tony rolling his eyes at a much-too-beautiful-to-be real Alex. Alex is holding a small mechanical dragon that's spouting a two-foot long flame. The dragon was Tony's attempt to make Alex a cigarette lighter.

Tony's body language is loose and easy, and he looks remarkably young. No goatee, no lines around his eyes. He's wearing eye makeup and some leather necklaces like those Steve's seen in pictures of rockstars. Clint's been educating him about modern music, to Steve's private horror. Still, Clint needs a hobby, so Steve is trying to get into it.

"How old was Tony when he made that dragon?"

"Fifteen. He'd been threatening us with dragons for years, of course, but he couldn't seem to help himself that year."

"I wonder if he still has it," Steve said. He guesses so. If Tony ever gave him an electric fire-breathing dragon, he'd keep it.

She laughs. "Actually, it lives in the school dining hall. They use it on feast days. Tony made him a second one, though."

Of course he had. Probably with upgrades.

"Do you have any more?" Steve asks.

"Dragons?"

"Pictures." Steve doesn't have any photos of his family. There are a few of Bucky, of Peggy, of the HCs and Howard. Lots of photos of his USO days and his friends then. No family, though.

"Sure."

Steve looks at the next series of photos, watching the slow transformation of Tony in scruffy red sneakers, hanging off his gorgeous best friend, to Na Stark, beautiful eligible marriageable heir.

It's kind of breaking Steve's heart.

"Stop," Steve says. The photo is of Tony, but it's not a Tony that Steve's seen so far. Tony's wearing a dark red shirt in shot silk--deep red and a kind of shimmery black, black slacks, black boots with heels. His makeup is as perfect as any of Steve's chorus girls had been, and there's a single bracelet on his left wrist: twisted silver and black leather. He's looking down, not meeting the viewer's eyes.

The photo is artistic, definitely posed. Behind Tony is a wall of dark stained granite, pitted with age, but the lighting is clear and perfect.

"What's this photo?" Steve asks. Whatever happened to Tony, whatever transformation has taken place to make him the person that Steve lives with now, it started here.

"This was taken several months after his parent's funeral," Na Anderson says. "A student took it. It was a portrait study for her final project in an art class."

"It's beautiful." And it is.

"Would you like a copy?"

Steve's not sure, but his mouth answers for him. "Yes, yes, I would. Thank you."

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

> A few quick notes. I thought I'd update folks about the state of the manuscript. The rough draft stands at 196K words and the ending is plotted out. I'm just a slow editor (partly because we've hit the part in the story where I need to carefully balance POVs).
>
> Second, this will definitely have a happy ending. Not just hopeful, but a fucking awesome happy ending, because dammit, Tony deserves a great ending. I have come to love Tony's character as I've written this story. His tenacity, his loyalty, his desire to help people even when they don't respect him. The story is as long as it is because it takes a while for that much growth in relationships to happen, I think, at least realistically, for a family to be built, for things to become steady and rock-solid. I want to blast through all the misunderstandings, shatter all the barriers, do what it takes to get Tony the most realistic, plausible, awesome ending this world can have. I guess I just wanted to assure everybody that's what I'm going for, and I refuse to stop writing until Tony gets to the awesome part. He deserves no less.

Despite all the crazy work he's been doing, Tony's actually pretty happy. Having Na Anderson in the city was great. While she was here, he spent as much time as could with her. Together, they developed some pretty cool demolition methods.

Personally, Tony hopes they never again needed to chemically butcher any more giant flying alien dinosaur corpses, but Na Anderson is going to write up their findings for the new journal of xenobiology.

To Tony's surprise, Na Anderson seems to like Steve. She doesn't trust him, of course. She isn't a trusting person, and Steve is still an alpha. But she likes him. Sometimes when she calls to chat with Tony, she gets Steve first (Steve actually answers the phone, whereas Tony hardly even notices the ringing). She and Steve always talk for a while before Steve makes Jarvis get Tony's attention.

It's kind of nice.

When most of the kinks in the lizard removal process have been ironed out, Na Anderson tells him that she needs to return to school. Her substitute is a fine man, but the house kids miss her. Tony understands, and in a way, he's relieved. More and more, Tony is sure that Steve will recognize her if he meets her face to face. Steve is a sweet guy, and Tony likes him. But what Tony will risk of himself and what he will risk of his, well, family are different.

Tony sends her home.

The city still isn't back to rights, and the other reason Tony sends her home shows up three days later.

Fucking super-villains have figured out that a city that's been smashed with a giant alien invasion fist is easier prey. Strategically, it makes sense. New York is a ripe plum, and with the streets fucked up and government services still stretched thin, it's a ripe plum lacking any guards.

The Revolutionists are some fucked up combo of luddite and mad scientist. They believe the invasion is part of God's Plan, whatever the hell that means.

They attack early on a Tuesday morning, hitting four separate locales, including the construction site where Tony's helping do critical energy structure work.

Fortunately, Tony keeps the suitcase suit nearby when on site.

Still, whomping mad scientists armed with flame throwers and grenades is fucking exhausting, and Tony still doesn't feel that great.

Also, Tony has decided that supervillains are not allowed to make giant flame throwers.

He's blown off the debrief by telling their latest SHIELD rep (an Agent Carmichael, she's no Coulson) that he's going to go invent hand-held Fire Extinguisher grenades right fucking now. The baffled but hopeful look is so fucking worth it.

Tony's currently in his most public workshop level at Stark House, tunes cranked, elbow-deep in a fascinating chunk of engine. "Jarvis," he says, twisting his wrist slightly and shoving hard, "how's that?"

"Sir, you remain 6.7 centimeters from the bolt you are trying to reach."

"Fuck a duck," Tony mutters, stretching his fingers and wriggling closer to the tiny tiny bolt. He's covered in grease, motor oil, and soot. God damn, this is fun. He should have pimped himself out as a mechanic on Craigslist years ago. You just never know what exciting mechanical delights the idiots of the world have in store for anyone who charges a mere fifty bucks per fix, cash only, delivery included.

Behind him, the workshop door whooshes open. "Good afternoon, Captain Rogers," Jarvis says.

"Hello, Jarvis," Rogers says.

"What's up, buttercup?" Tony's allllllmost there. Allllmost. Just one more inch--

"I have a favor to ask."

Tony just grunts. There's no answer, so Tony rolls his eyes and goes verbal. "Which is?"

"Um. Can you--" Rogers stops. In the reflection on the cabinet, Tony can see him duck his head. It's this weird routine that Tony finds oddly fascinating. Rogers is just so easily embarrassed, by everything, and Tony hasn't been capable of embarrassment in a decade.

"Can I what?" Tony cranes his head around to look at him.

"Oh, thank you."

Tony gives up on the part and pulls his arm out before he dislocates his shoulder. He'll have better luck as soon as he can get Rogers out of here. "Can I what? Having trouble with your bike? I worked on that starter mechanism Saturday, when I heard it hiccup. If you're planning a post-battle zoom trip, you're good to go. I changed the oil while I was at it. You really shouldn't let those military boys play with your toys."

"No, I--they offered. It seemed rude to refuse."

Tony grabs the rag that Dummy is ineffectually fluttering over him. He scrubs it vaguely against his oil-encrusted arm, tosses it somewhere workbench-ish. "There were scratches on the bolts. They can't even use the right wrench. I'm the best, so I fixed it, but even I cannot completely guarantee that your bike will survive if they dump the oil and you drive it. Of course, I guess I could just replace the engine....Jarvis, we need to get Rogers' bike down here, do some scans. Let's get some diagnostics done so when the military boys freeze his engine block, we can--"

"Tony!"

He turns back to Rogers. "What?"

"If I promise not to let them work on my bike again, will you stop talking?"

Tony grabs a bottle from the bench, slugs some back. "Since it's for the greater-good of motorcycle-kind."

The captain moves closer. He's in civvies now, showered, but he still looks fresh from battle somehow. His hair is still damp but he smells like soap and faint alpha-fight pheromones. "I have a favor to ask."

"I'm listening." Tony's gone still on his work stool. There's something....predatory about the way Rogers is moving. Like he's still on the field, coiled power tightly leashed, but ready to spring.

"When we were back on the jet, I could smell blood on you."

Tony raises his eyebrows, but hides his expression with the water bottle. Interesting. He'd only had the damn armor mask raised for less than a minute.

"I need to check you over." Rogers stops talking, carefully loosens his hands, tries to relax his shoulders. It's completely ineffective. He still looks deadly. "I would *like* to check you over."

"I took care of it. Jarvis scans me in the suit, and when I get back."

"I know. That's why it's a favor. I know it, up here." He taps his temple. "But not--inside. The smell, it's hard for me to bring it down. I need, I would like to know, that you're safe."

Tony stares at him. He lost body shyness years ago. There's pictures of him everywhere, and he's fine with that. It's just odd to have Rogers stand here so earnest. "I get the feeling that looking is not enough, somehow."

"I--" Rogers stops.

"You're turning bright pink. It's clashing horribly with your tee shirt." Fine, Tony thinks. Fuck his life, but the longer they're in this conversation, the weirder it's getting. He stands up and pulls his tee shirt over his head. He hears Rogers inhale sharply, but hey buddy, you asked for it. Tony pulls off each shoe, unzips his jeans, drags down everything, including socks, and dumps it to one side. Then he twirls around like a dancer. "Here you go, all fine."

Rogers is just suddenly right there. An inch away.

"Whoah, big guy." Tony knows Rogers won't hurt him, but still, he puts a hand out. "Personal space, it's a thing."

Rogers' pupils are dilated, his nostrils flare wide, and he's crouching down, sniffing audibly. He doesn't come any closer, but he's intent.

"What are you doing?" Tony asks, because the guy is clearly tracking something that starts at his right hip and moving down to the back of his calf.

"Someone touched you." It comes out a low growl.

Tony cranes his head because Rogers is behind him now, sniffing his calf. "EMT. Possible sprain in my--hey, *no*." Tony grabs Rogers by the hair before the guy bolts, because Tony has a nasty suspicion that Rogers means to do something to the poor kid who checked him over and supplied him with ice packs. "Hey, I said *no*."

Rogers bares his teeth at Tony, and that--OK, that shouldn't be hot. But he's not trying to leap away anymore, which is probably the best Tony can get right now.

Tony just keeps hold of him by the hair. "Jarvis, do you know why the good Captain's gone sub-verbal, by any chance?"

"Perhaps he's worried for your safety, sir."

Yeah, maybe. Pepper worries about him all the time, but she's never snarled like this. Of course, Pepper is Pepper.

It's just fucking bizarre, although probably typical of Tony's fucked up life, that he's buck-naked and holding Mr Muscles of the Year by the hair. Which- actually is lining up his anatomy to the guy's nose. Whoops.

Tony immediately crouches down, puts them eye to eye. Rogers dislodges Tony's hand with a quick shake of his head, then leans forward, sniffing again.

"OK, you know what, this is getting a little odd, here, Rogers."

"Another one. They hurt you." Rogers eyes are almost black, the pupils are so dilated. He's tracking from Tony's left shoulder over to his right arm and back.

"But I'm fine," Tony says firmly before this gets any stranger. "Look at me. Captain!"

Rogers quits sniffing his bicep. Suddenly they're nose to nose. Whoah. OK, Tony, not such a great idea. Really.

"I'm fine," Tony says again, trying with all his might to mean it.

Rogers sniffs, seems to consider it. Sniffs again. "Hurt," he says accusingly.

"But--" Right. Can't argue with the senses. "I had two minor scrapes. On my left arm. Would you like to see?"

Rogers nods fiercely.

Ohhhh-kay. Tony, moving very slowly, shows him the bandages that he'd slapped on. One has a Hello Kitty band aid because Jarvis is nothing if not a bastard when ordering first-aid supplies. The other required one of the larger two-inch bandages.

Rogers grumbles to himself, a low muttering non-verbal commentary. After a long careful inspection, he seems satisfied with the bandages, though. Tony's got practice, and it's not exactly hard to wash a scrape, slap on some ointment, and cover it up with band aids.

"Jarvis," the Captain says suddenly, "what are Na Stark's scans showing?"

"You can talk again," Tony says. "Great. Does that mean I can put my clothes back on?"

"No. Jarvis?"

"Sir's scans indicate a minor hamstring sprain in his right thigh, two scrapes from contact with concrete pre-suit, several bruises on his arm and knee, also from contact with concrete pre-suit, minor dehydration, elevated blood pressure, elevated heart rate. Lung capacity, while reduced, is within post-arc reactor norms. He is suffering no more than the minor effects of any mission. We have treated the dehydration with fluids, and both his heart rate and his blood pressure are improving. However, your closeness to sir is again elevating both."

Thank you, Jarvis. Fucking beautiful. "In other words," Tony says, "I am *fine*."

The Captain raises his head and sniffs again, air-scenting. He moves just a little bit closer, sniffs, pulls away, sniffs. He has this odd earnest look now that's not nearly so predatory.

"Allrighty then," Tony says. "Now that you've checked me over in my birthday suit, you're either going to have to start making with the pretty compliments or I'm going to start getting dressed again. OK, gorgeous?"

Rogers looks at him, eyes fierce once more. Maybe the joke wasn't such a good idea. Then suddenly the guy's moving, and damn, he can move a lot faster than a lug like him should. Rogers is across the room, but still facing Tony.

"OK," Rogers says. His body language is stiff. Embarrassed. The slow slinking predator is gone. "I'm-- Thank you. For the favor. I was just, you know, worried."

Tony raises his eyebrows, still crouched naked on the floor of his own goddamn workshop. "Uh huh."

Rogers whirls and he's out the door.

Tony stares after him. "Jarvis, what the fuck was that?"

"I really could not say, sir."

"Right." Tony's feeling a sudden urge for pants. He starts getting dressed again. "I need you to do two things for me. One, I want a search for authoritative articles on alpha behavior post battle, mission, whatever. Find out what the fuck just happened there. Two, lock the damn workshop. I am going to work on my goddamn boat engine. I promised that guy he'd have it back tomorrow. Capisce?"

"Very good, sir."

Tony zips his jeans and tugs his tee shirt down. For some reason that he doesn't think too closely about, he grabs a long sleeved shirt and pulls that on, too.

"Great. Now monitor me and tell me how close I'm getting to the damn bolt."

*

The results that Jarvis pulls up indicate that, yes, in militaries where omegas are allowed to serve, alpha-leaders sometimes become quite protective. Even minor injuries to an omega can induce severe protective pack-type behavior in senior alphas. Including, but not limited to, checking the omega for injuries, increased need for security measures surrounding the omegas, stockpiling of munitions, paranoia, scent-marking both the omega and the omega's belongings, territoriality, and insubordination to direct orders involving omega safety.

All the articles had the same recommendation: Remove omegas from combat.

Gee, thanks.

*

Tony shoves that out of his mind and focuses on the work. He spends the rest of the evening fixing the glorious mess of the bass boat engine. There's rust, there's stripped bolts, there's so

much clogged oil that he has to machine a few new parts from scratch. There's even some kind of mollusc attached to crucial parts. It's fantastic.

His own machinery never gets fucked up this way, and it's very soothing to right the mechanical wrongs of the world.

When he eventually returns to civilization and the common room, looking for food that doesn't come in a slim glass jar, he sees the team sprawled on couches or cushions, watching Die Hard again.

Tony moseys over to a pizza box and grabs a slice.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Rogers get up from his original chair and move to a couch. Tony eats some pizza, considers. It just seems weird. He pokes through the boxes for another slice. The layout of the room means that Rogers' original chair was positioned closest to the door leading to Tony's workshop. Rogers' new position on the couch is--fuck. His position on the couch covers the hallway that leads to the elevator. Rogers is not changing seats to see the movie better, he's changing seats to guard Tony.

Tony takes his slice of pizza to the living room to test this hypothesis, because he really hopes he's wrong.

The bar is close to the only other exit--a small hallway that leads to a service elevator. It's natural for Tony to wander over there and fix himself a more fancy drink than usual. Something that takes time to putter over.

Damn.

Steve gets up and walks over to the small hallway that leads to the service elevator. He's trying to be subtle about it, but Rogers is not a subtle guy.

"Still under the hormonal whammy," Tony says quietly.

Rogers jumps like he's been shot. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're guarding me, Rogers. It's sweet, but I can actually take care of myself."

"I know that. I know that."

"Right. Hence the hormonal whammy. Want a drink?" Tony's completed a complex juice-liqueur masterpiece of layered colors capped with two cherries, an umbrella, and a bendy straw.

To Tony's surprise, Steve takes it. Huh. "Thought you couldn't get drunk."

"I can't." Steve twists the straw. "Seems a shame to let it go to waste, though."

Right, the Depression. "Want to tell me what the hell happened earlier?"

"I got....upset, when I smelled you were hurt."

"Yeah, I got that part. I'd just like to point out that Agent Carmichael was injured last time, with those weird looters. Shot in the thigh. That didn't seem to upset you."

Steve doesn't say anything. He plays with the straw a little, still careful so he doesn't destroy Tony's careful layers. "She's not mine."

"I'm not either," Tony points out. He's poured himself a bourbon and ginger. Maybe it will help.

Steve swirls the straw and the dark red pomegranate and the bright pink grapefruit mixes with the clear vodka and straw colored liqueur until everything's a cheery peach color. "I should apologize. I know I overstepped."

"You don't look all that sorry." Tony knocks back half his drink. The burn is warm and familiar.

"I should be."

"You're not, though."

Steve ducks his head. His hair is longer than most military men's. The long blond bangs cover his eyes for a moment before he sweeps them back. "No, I'm not sorry. I *needed* to make sure you were OK."

Tony's nostrils tingle with the sudden wash of possessive alpha pheromones pouring off Steve. "I'm not actually yours, Captain."

"You're not married," Rogers points out, voice subdued.

Whoah. Tony stills, drink halfway to his mouth. He carefully puts it back down. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Steve is looking at him through hooded eyes. "You don't belong to anyone else."

Tony should be afraid of Steve. He's an alpha, and he's a lot stronger, and he's pouring off pheromones like they're at a goddamn sex party. But it's Steve. He's just too earnest to be scary. "I belong to *me*, Rogers."

"I asked Fury whether you were Pepper's."

Tony chokes on his drink. "What?"

"You let her into your personal space, she gets to touch you, but I never smell your sex on her. And she doesn't keep you safe. She's not a good alpha for you, Tony." Rogers looks so earnest.

"Whoah, whoah, whoah. Look Captain, I do not know what else you've been reading about this century, but--"

"I smelled that man two nights ago, Tony. The one with the spiky hair and the earring. He reeked of you. Sex and blood." Steve's pupils are blown again. "At first I thought you were off limits because you belonged to Miss Potts. But you don't. Who was he?"

"That's none of your fucking business."

"It is my business. I could smell you all over him! And there was blood."

Fucking hell. "He didn't do anything I didn't want him to do."

"Is that how you like it, Stark? Being taken rough like that?"

Tony's head snaps back, like he's been slapped. Leave it to goddamn Captain fucking America to be a judgemental asshole. When is he going to learn to be properly paranoid?

But Rogers slips in closer, and the alpha pheromones have shifted. It's dizzying. Tony smells sunshine and clean laundry, high and bright and clear. He shakes his head, trying to clear it, but it's hard. Rogers is crowding him against the bar, not touching him, but very much in his personal space.

Tony's body is listening to a whole different story than Tony's mind, because his head turns, baring the side of his throat like the slut he is. He hears Rogers inhale sharply, knows he's leaning in close. Tony's breath is coming in short little pants, and he's turned on, far more than he should be.

His dick is half-hard in his jeans, but it's the wetness pooling in his belly that--

No.

Tony is not going to do this. He knows what his body wants, knows what will happen, understands exactly how close he is to falling under and zoning out, the dissociation so sweet and clear, and then coming to again, face down on the floor, being fucked from behind. It's happened before; it will happen again. But it isn't going to happen right now.

Tony slides his back down the bar, knows it will be submissive, likes that it is, in some part of him. Rogers pulls away, just a little, lessening the pressure, rewarding the submission.

Then Tony slips to the side, out from under Rogers' arms. The Captain watches him, intent, but not chasing.

Not yet.

Tony keeps his body in the submissive pose, gentle, relaxed shoulders, even as he's backing slowly away. He isn't stupid enough to say anything like 'I'm going to bed now' or even 'goodnight'. Far too risky.

When his back hits the right wall panel, Tony rests his hand against the biometric scan-plate. The door whooshes open, Tony steps back. Then the door slides shut again, fast, cutting off Tony's view of the Captain's startled face.

Tony shuts his eyes, breathing hard. He hears the slam of the floor-based bolts sliding home.

"Sir?" Jarvis asks, voice soft and quiet, probably pitched to avoid the Captain's senses picking it up. "Your vitals are nearing my emergency overrides. Would you like me to call for any assistance?"

"I don't think so, J." Tony steps backwards, still slow and careful, in the thin small corridor of concrete and steel. The Captain can't see him, but Tony still can't turn and expose his back.

"Are you certain, sir?"

Tony clenches his jaw. He's not, actually. That door is steel, and it's got floor bolts that Tony designed himself. Even the Captain should have trouble. "I think I may take one of the backup suits and go for a flight."

"I think that is an excellent notion, Sir. Perhaps you might wish to land at one of your alternate homes. The one in Long Island, perhaps. Or the one in upstate. I believe the upstate home should be checked. There have been a few recents breakins due to raccoon activity. You wouldn't wish your parent's home to suffer such a fate."

"Yeah," Tony says, belly awash in relief. "Yeah, that's a good idea."

Chapter 31

That night, curled in a bed deep in the bowels of Na Anderson's workshop, Tony dreams another ending.

Surrounded by the scent of Steve's arousal, bracketed by Steve's arms, Tony's trapped against the bar. Just where he wants to be.

There's a butterfly brush against his throat. Soft, gentle. Tony's breath hitches. God, he wants it. Suddenly, he just needs it, and his brain is shutting off and his body is taking over. He turns his head further to the side, showing off his neck. He slides his legs apart, offering it up. The lips brush his neck, nibble at his jaw.

Tony hears himself whimper, feels the wetness pooling in his boxers. It's like Rogers is flipping his switches one by one. God, he wants it. Slowly, very slowly, Tony turns around so his belly is braced against the bar, ass towards Rogers. His head hangs down, and he's panting, so fucking ready for it.

All he needs is for Steve to clamp his teeth down on his neck, and Tony will be completely under. He'll do whatever Steve wants, let Steve have him completely. The haze of submission is already clouding his mind. He shivers, waiting.

Steve isn't moving, though.

There's a touch at last. Steve's hand is on his hip. Tony's rolls his back, rubs his ass against Steve's front, lewd as he dares. It'll probably get him slapped, but he's getting so damn desperate.

"Tony," Steve murmurs, right in his ear. Finally. God, finally he's getting somewhere.

Tony tips his head back, baring his neck,. "Yes? Do you like me like this?"

Steve's hands hold his hips still. God, that's good. Tony struggles, but Steve holds him perfectly still. Ah, he's like *that*. Tony can work with that. "I'm not allowed to move unless you let me," Tony says. God, Steve is strong. He stuggles again, just to get Steve going. "Do you like it when I struggle? I bet you can hold me still with one hand. Leaves you one hand to do all kinds of things, doesn't it? What're you going to do with that other hand, Steve? Are you going to touch me? Fuck me? Hurt me?" He drawls the last words out nice and slow, sexy.

Tony's braced in front of the bar, and so when he opens his eyes, he can see Steve's face in the mirror. He's expecting arousal, blown pupils, wet mouth, anger at being teased by an omega in need of a good hard fuck.

Tony's completely unprepared for the pity in Steve's eyes.

"*Fuck*," Tony says. It's like being doused with icy water. The shame is roiling in his belly again, the heat of it mixing with fear. "I didn't--I was just, you know, fooling around. I'll go."

But when he tries to pull away, Steve's hands are holding him still. "Tony, we should talk about this."

And it's fucking humiliating, because Steve had smelled of arousal, but Tony's been too far under to pay attention to the way that scent had faded and is now like a wisp of what it had been. Tony's little display has completely killed it.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Tony's saying, over and over. God, he is. He really really is. Saying it is worse, but his mouth won't obey his brain.

Very slowly, Steve pulls his hand away. "We need to talk--"

"Let. me. *go*."

Steve does, and Tony pulls out of his grip. There's no place safe, no place in the house where Tony will be safe from the shame.

He can't stay here, where Rogers' eyes will look at him like that, surprised and sad and full of pity. Tony just goes, running down corridors that never seem to end.

When Tony jolts awake, he lays there, panting for a long time.

Fuck.

Even in a dream, his subconscious insists on being genius-level smart. Couldn't it have at least gotten him laid before giving him the 'Sorry I just want to be friends' speech? Couldn't it have let Stephen fucking Rogers at least get his alpha on *one single time* instead of moving straight to 'nope, not into damaged goods or sloppy seconds'?

Apparently not.

Tony curls deeper under the covers. Yes, as Na Anderson knows, Tony has a little crush. Yes, Steve is devastatingly handsome and sort of the pinacle of human perfection. Yes, Steve is actually a really nice guy. Yes, they're living together and eating together and fighting together. Yes, Steve smells fucking fantastic.

But Tony is not, and never will be, the kind who can give in Steve. Not like that. Tony's not the sort you take on dates or bring to meet friends or, hell, do more than fuck senseless a time or two. Sure, he's good in bed, but that's it. An eccentric billionaire living in a giant house full of clockwork and iron, except whoops, the crazy person living in the attic is him, too.

Yeah. Nothing good can come of giving into Rogers' weird hormonal pleas. Steve's backbrain will smell Tony's hurt and tell him to fuck it all better, but if Tony gives in... Well, Steve would wake up with the worst morning regrets the world has ever seen.

It would make their fight on the Hellicarrier look like a mature discussion.

Because after what Steve said, it's clear that Steve thinks he's a slut. Of course, yes, Tony is a slut. He fucks around, he likes it rough, he's loud, he's easy, he's so submissive Steve would be appalled and look at him with revulsion and pity.

It's one thing to know that about himself, but it's another to realize that Steve knows it, too. He'd kind of hoped for something a little different, stupid as it is.

Tony's too, well, broken for a relationship. He's a mix of ugly extremes--can't be near people for days, slut of the century (thanks TMZ). There's no way to do anything about it with Steve without their whole worlds crashing down around them.

Tony had been kind of hoping for his usual one night of torrid passion, because he can do that. He can turn himself into exactly what Steve would enjoy, if it's just one night. He'd make it perfect. But....not at the risk of the whole team.

If he'd let Steve have him, Tony knows exactly how it would end. Flat on his face, fucked senseless, and out of the team tomorrow.

No omegas allowed in combat, because it drives their alphas crazy. Right. Every single fucking article Jarvis pulled up said the same damn thing. Alpha on the brink? Bench your omegas.

And Steve, loyal company soldier that he happens to be, will be thrilled about following that particular rule. He'll have other rules, too. Cut back on the drinking. Be a good boy. Don't talk in meetings. Hell, don't go to meetings. Just lie on your back and make me feel good.

It's not that Tony's averse to the sex he knows a lead alpha wants. He'd be willing to do that, if it helped, if it kept him on the team. There's even a small chance he'd enjoy it.

But he's not giving up his work. He's *not*.

There would be other things, too. Steve would want him to play nice at parties, go to all those horrible charity gigs to pimp himself out for what Steve wants. Steve would be jealous of Pepper, is jealous of Pepper. Hell, Steve would want control of SI--the military's been drooling to get Tony make weapons again and Steve would be the perfect leverage.

No night of fucking, no matter how delightful (and Tony's honestly no longer sure Steve's going to be all that good), is worth it.

Tony scrubs his hands through his hair. He isn't going to be able to sleep, not now. Damn his subconscious, now he can't even jack off to images of Steve reading the sex books. After that judgemental comment, it's taken all the fun out of imagining Steve's face full of surprise and delight. Now it's just full of scorn (you like *what*?).

Maybe he'll get up and mix some explosives.

When in doubt, blow shit up.

Chapter 32

Dear Na Stark,

I wish to apologize for my very regrettable behavior last evening. I was really out of line, Stark. I'm sorry.

Look, I know you may never want to see me again. Jarvis said that you left the house. Stark, this is your home, and if anyone is going to leave, it should be me. I am sending this as an email, so if you decide you want me to go, I will, you don't have to even talk to me again. No questions asked, and I'll deal with Fury. I have taken the liberty of going to SHIELD for now, so you can come home. I won't return at all unless you tell me it's OK.

I'd like to talk about this, explain what happened, but if you don't, I won't press. You can send a message to me here or through Jarvis.

Sincerely,

Captain Stephen Rogers,

Leader, Avengers Initiative, SHIELD

*

Tony stares at the email on his phone in complete bewilderment. Yes, Steve went off the rails, but it's not like Tony's never dealt with an alpha in overdrive before. Hell, Steve barely touched him. Tony's a bit harder wearing than that. There was no need to completely move out of the house forever. The whammy does wear off.

"Jarvis," Tony says. "Tell Captain Alpha that I'd like to speak to him via video conference at his earliest convenience, will you?"

"Of course, sir."

Tony tucks his phone into his flannel shirt pocket and stretches. He punches the button on the teeny coffee maker he installed down here years ago, and it whirs to life. Tony should think about restocking the water bottle supplies, but there's still a couple cases left.

"Captain Rogers is on the line for you, Sir."

"What, now? He's awake?"

"Yes, Sir. Captain Rogers indicated that he was waiting for your call."

Tony checks the clock. It's 4:23 am. What the fuck? Steve normally gets up at 6:30 for his run. Well, OK, maybe the guy was kind of upset, too. Tony's never had an alpha whammy, obviously, but it does look painful in that 'I've completely lost my mind' sort of way. Maybe that makes it hard to sleep? "Put him on," Tony says.

Tony's wearing a battered black tee shirt full of holes and a heavy black watch plaid. He's still curled up in his cave nest, so this isn't going to be the perfect picture. Cap likes order and routine, and the workshop nest is a bit more feral engineer in his natural habitat. Also, Tony's hair is maybe a little--he slaps at it, but from the feel, it's still sticking straight up.

Jarvis, technological wonder that he is, has already put the video of Rogers on the nearest screen.

Tony frowns. Steve doesn't look good. He's sitting on one of those camp beds, hands clasped between his knees, shoulders hunched. He's wearing exactly the same clothes that Tony last saw him in, and he looks as miserable and ashamed a man as Tony has ever seen.

"Steve?" Tony asks slowly. Yes, Steve fucked up, but Tony did handle it. Eventually.

Steve looks up through his bangs slowly, like a kid who knows the headmaster is really pissed and expulsion is imminent. Steve's eyes are red rimmed and his face is blotchy. Holy shit, has he--no. Definitely not.

"Na Stark," Steve says. He swallows hard and his large hands grip each other tight. Tony can see the white knuckles. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me."

"Figured we should," Tony says. Yes, Steve fucked up, and yes, honestly, Tony's pretty pissed about it, but now he's just flat out worried. "What the hell are you doing at SHIELD, Rogers?"

"I wanted to make sure you could come home if you wanted to."

"Yeah, you mentioned that." Tony had thought it was an odd old fashioned gesture. Or that Steve had gotten worse, maybe gone into a true Fight state. "Steve, did something else happen?"

"I think enough happened, don't you?"

Tony's used that dodge himself often enough. It's what he always says when he doesn't want to mention fucked up decision dominos. Steve looks so wrecked that Tony lets it go. One problem at a time. "Can you tell me what was going on in your head?"

Steve is subdued for a while, then one shoulder shifts in a shrug. "I'm not sure I can explain it. No real excuse."

"Just start in the middle. Or from the side. Come at it from a different angle."

Steve chews on that for a while. He looks up, briefly, then down at the floor again. The shame is so clear that Tony doesn't know what to think. "When I was overseas, sometimes we'd get leave."

"Sure," Tony says.

"One time, I went with one of my buddies, Ricky, and Ricky's girl. I mean, we were overseas, but they were serious. You know?"

Tony just nods, but he's getting a bad feeling about this.

"He had some money, so she wanted to go shopping. She was gonna buy a new dress, and we went to this store, but supplies were tight. They didn't have her size. She was a little, you know--" Steve makes an a gesture, then drops his hands again, embarrassed.

"Curvy, Rogers, I get it," Tony says drily. "It's not like she could just buy the remaining size and make do."

"So the clerk, he says something smart about it to Ricky's girl, and Ricky, he just picks the guy up by the neck and slams him into the wall, hard."

"Yikes."

"Yikes," Steve agrees. "Ricky's girl is screaming, and I'm trying to get him off, and all these other clerks are coming up fast. What a mess. Ricky though, he just shakes the fella like a terrier with a rat, tells him to apologize. Which the guy does, though how he could talk at all, I'm not sure. I had to move Ricky's girl out of the way so I could pull him off him."

"Not a great date night," Tony says, though he can picture the whole thing clearly. "I guess she didn't get her dress."

"No." Steve folds his hands together, twining his fingers in and out. "At the time, I thought Ricky'd kind of lost it. Lost his mind. But now I know what it's like."

"How long had Ricky been in combat for, Steve?"

Steve's head hangs lower and he just shakes it.

"OK. How long have you been in heavy combat?"

"I haven't been," Steve says. He covers his face with his hands. "Not for a long time, Stark."

"Bullshit. You'd only been out of the ice for a few months when fucking giant alien overlords descended on Manhattan. Before that, you were in combat nearly 24/7 for fucking years, Steve. The Army started making rules about combat tour lengths for a reason. People need time to rest, to cope, to be with their families or they forget how to function in the world."

"I never needed rest. That was kind of the point."

Tony can't help it. He rolls his eyes. "Not that kind of rest. If you put people in heavy combat for years at a time, they can sometimes react in pretty severe ways."

"I could have really hurt you."

"Yes, but you didn't," Tony says.

"Only because you're a paranoid supervillain," Steve mutters.

Tony laughs. "Thank you."

Steve glares at him. "It wasn't supposed to be funny." Then he remembers that he's not supposed to be mad at Tony and goes back to staring at the floor.

"I take my humor where I find it. Look at me."

Steve does, but his eyes are haunted. "I really lost control."

"Yes, you did. What was going on in that mind of yours?"

"You know that you're the only one who calls me by my name?"

Yes, actually, Tony has noticed that. He nods.

"The doctors, the psychiatrists here, they keep telling me that it's important to have connections. All my connections are gone. I don't want to make friends with my dead friend's niece, Stark. It just makes it all so much worse."

SHEILD's been hooking Steve up with vague shade-tree relatives of his *dead friends*? Jesus, no wonder the guy's on his last legs. Talk about shoving their deaths down his throat. "So, what happened?"

"This is the first time I've smelled your blood in a fight since you fell."

Oh.

Tony stares at him. "You thought I was going to really die. Not in a little way, but in a big way."

Steve's hands are trembling. "It's not the first time I've lost someone in a fall. And I'm the one who made the call to close the portal. If I'd been a second longer, you'd be *gone*. You're the only one I have here and you'd be *gone*."

"I'm not gone, Stephen. You're OK, and I'm here, and everything is OK." Looking at the way Steve's shaking, tiny tremors all along his body, Tony's surprised he's lasted as long as he has. Tony hacked Steve's file, he knows about Barnes falling, but had anyone put it together? No. Had anyone combined Steve's involvement in both? No.

Steve's hands are over his face. Tony knows this is how Rhodey and his friends cry. Silent, hidden, not moving except for small shakes through their bodies. You can't give away your position with screams and wails, not in war, no matter how much it hurts. Tony learned to cry like that in the caves.

"Steve. We'll figure this out."

Steve sniffs hard. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, well," Tony says, sighing. This would be a nice place to end it, but their lives are not nice. "What was that about my other lovers and asking Fury about Pepper?"

Steve hunches his shoulders, embarrassed, guilty, but not actually ashamed. "I was a jerk."

"Yeaaaaaaah, how about you just fess up. Are you trying to get me into bed so you can bench me?"

Steve stares at him like he's lost his mind. "What?"

"You heard me. Are you trying to fuck me so you can go all alpha-overlord and tell me to stay home and be a good little boy?"

"Is that what you think?" Steve sounds scandalized.

Tony rolls his eyes, because uh, yes? That is *exactly* what he thinks. "Every last article I had Jarvis pull said that the answer to your whackadoo hormone sniffing obsession problem is benching the omegas from combat. With a sideline of benching them right into bed where they belong."

"This century is so stupid." Steve grabs the sleeve of his tee shirt and wipes his eyes with it. "It's just so *stupid*."

"You did say that Pepper isn't a good alpha for me and that she doesn't keep me safe," Tony points out. That is fairly significant evidence in his favor.

"She's dividing your time between being an Avenger and inventing all this stuff for Stark Industries!"

"It is my company," Tony points out drily.

"But you can't be an Avenger and rebuild New York and invent a thousand gadgets and schmooze charity galas and fix the hellicarrier and solve whatever Fury's thrown at you this week. You can't tell me that you've had longer than five hours' worth of sleep in the past two weeks."

"I got six hours night before last."

"Only because you didn't have any the night before!"

"So I might be a workaholic, a little, but that does not mean it's Pepper's fault."

"Well, someone should be looking out for you! I thought she was supposed to be your alpha, but she isn't, and then you came home smelling like some strange gross guy."

"Rogers, are you *jealous*?"

Steve glowers at him, and his nose is still pink from crying. He crosses his arms over his huge chest. "No. I just didn't like the smell of him. You'd been bleeding."

Tony clamps his jaw tight.

"And I know," Steve says, barreling on, eyes narrowing right back, "that I don't have a right to say it, but Honey didn't like him either. You couldn't find your wallet, and I think he *stole* it."

Oh for the love of god. Steve makes it sound like some huge crime wave. "What I choose to do on my own time is my own business."

"I don't have to like it."

"You'd by god better be polite about it."

"Oh, like you are," Steve says, throwing his arms wide. "You had an orgy in the living room!"

"Don't tell me you didn't like that," Tony says, leaning forward. "I could smell it all over you."

"Of course I liked that. That isn't the point!"

"It is the damn point!"

They're staring at each, both furious.

Steve looks away. "I know that I have no right to comment on what you do. I overstepped last night because I was upset, and it was unforgiveable. But I still think that someone should have your best interests at heart."

"And make sure I don't fuck anyone who's rough trade?" Because the nerve, the goddamn fucking nerve of him.

Steve's eyes thin to narrow slits. "If you had actually smelled like pleasure instead of fear, I wouldn't have said a damn thing."

Tony's eyes widen and he jerks back. "You--"

"My senses are a little bit stronger than other people's," Steve says through clenched teeth. "I can't help it."

"Look," Tony says, voice low and hard, "for the record, I slept with that asshole to get the goddamn vote for the subway rebuild on 42nd Street, and yes, he was rough, and yes, I couldn't find my wallet, but that really is none of your fucking business."

Steve is breathing fast. "Is that how you like it? Because you sure didn't smell like you enjoyed it."

Fucking hell. "Fine. You know what? Yes, when I'm me, I do like it rough. I am a hardcore submissive, and I'm sorry that offends your modest goddamn American sensibilities, Rogers, but it's not exactly something I can control. If you don't like it, I'll buy you some fucking nose plugs, you judgmental jerk."

"Tony, that's not--"

"And another thing. If you want a round with me? If you want to sleep together? If you can get that stick out of your ass enough to get it up? I'd be happy to take you for a tumble and

show you exactly what you're missing. But it's for one night only, no takebacks, no repeats, and no benching me."

Tony can see the flicker in those blue eyes. Oh yeah, Steve wants it. Wants it despite being a puritanical asshole. "Well?" Tony drawls.

Steve is still breathing hard and Tony can see that his fists are clenched. Oh yeah, he's really pissed him off. Good. Steve says, voice growling, "I am not benching you. And I am sorry I came onto you in a way that made it seem like I had a right, any right, to your person. You get to make your own choices. For the record, I don't think there's anything wrong with an omega who's submissive."

Right, sure he doesn't. "Yeah? Because you look like you're about to blow a gasket."

"That's because you think I'd have sex with you to get you off the team! The whole reason my old team was so good was because we took our omegas into war with us!"

"And then fucked them after?"

"Stark, I hate to destroy your naive illusions, but a lot of soldiers get hard during combat. If your lover is nearby, then yes, people fall into bed. But for your information, the whole entire stupid reason I wanted to have sex with you was to keep you on my team."

"What?"

Steve's eyes are shut and he looks horribly embarrassed. The blush has gone from his cheeks down his neck and up his ears. "Oh my gosh, I said that out loud."

"Uh, yeah, you kind of did."

Steve puts a hand over his face.

"I thought you were getting kind of all primal and protecty, but it wasn't quite that simple, was it?" Tony leans forward. Wow, the blush is spreading to Steve's chest. "Steve, were you trying to cock block Fury?"

"I don't know what you mean," Steve mutters. Behind his hands.

"You were. Holy shit." Tony knows that Fury keeps making these forays into sticking Tony on the Hellicarrier as an advisor again. Which, given how well that worked out last time, is not Tony's idea of a good time.

"If you're nearby, I can keep an eye on you," Steve says, but he sounds weary.

"Uh huh. I thought you knew I could keep myself safe."

"I just--can we drop this?"

"What do you think?"

"OK, it's possible that yesterday," Steve says, not meeting Tony's eyes, "during the debrief, which you skipped by the way, Hill mentioned something about putting you on a consulting team."

Tony feels the anger raise deep in his gut, like a tidal wave. "A consulting team. With you?"

"No. For the World Security Counsel. Hill mentioned it in the briefing."

"The fuckers who *nuked my city?*"

Steve slumps back, looks at Tony, exhausted but not angry anymore. "Yeah, that was kind of my reaction, too."

"Jesus, Rogers, if you'd mentioned that I'd have ridden you like a pony for free. Probably on the briefing table. Christ."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Steve says, but his eyes aren't as haunted. "But, uh, what do they say these days? Thanks for that mental image."

Tony waves that off. "I knew they were up to something. Like I'd play ball with those WSC assholes."

"Stark. We had that combat fight, and then you were bloody, and then the debrief, and then you were so nice to me and tried *to talk to me* about it, and then I just lost it. I'm sorry."

"I know." Tony shakes his head. "Look, believe me, I know. You have no idea how familiar I am with doing shit based on your lizard brain's lame ass idea or in the grip of some kind of PTSD funk. But we're not doing this again."

Steve grips his hands and goes back to staring at the floor.

"Quit that," Tony says grumpily. "I'm not sending you to the goddamn dog pound. Look. We're doing some things differently. Even if the entirety of SHIELD loses its collective marbles, I am not consulting for the dark suited world mafia. You will continue to live in my house. We will be friends. And I'm getting you some decent therapy."

"I've got a SHIELD counselor," Steve says quietly.

"Yeah, we're not doing that. You live with me, you see somebody decent. I'll pay. Before you even say it, I don't want to hear anything about security clearances or any of that crap. You're going to do this, or you're not going to live with me, period."

"OK," Steve says.

"Just like that?"

Steve nods. "Just like that."

"So.....are we good?" Tony asks, because he thinks so, but people are weird.

"We're good."

"You're coming home, right?" Tony presses.

"As soon as you tell Jarvis it's OK."

Hmm. "Steve, what did the team do? Where were Natasha and Barton?"

Steve looks sheepish, licks his lips.

"Steve?"

"Barton shot me with a tranquilizer when you opened that door."

Go team. "In the butt?" Tony asks, because he's only human.

Steve grimaces.

Tony's still laughing when he calls Jarvis.

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

This chapter is for R.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve wishes he was glad to be home, but he's still terrified of how badly he screwed up. He's got a lot of work to do, because SHIELD has him on all these committees and they keep asking him to run all these training exercises.

When he puts his duffle bag back down on his bed in his own bedroom, Jarvis says, "Welcome back, Captain Rogers. Sir has cleared your calendar for this afternoon at 3 o'clock."

"I have a meeting with the Brooklyn rehab committee," Steve says. He's going to do what Tony asked, but he needs to reschedule all these darn meetings.

"Sir cleared your calendar, Captain."

"How?" Steve says. Tony's still upstate, Steve's certain.

"I did not inquire."

Steve should ask for details, but he's tired. "Where's my appointment?"

Jarvis puts a map onscreen. It's clearly marked, and Steve can take the subway or his bike. Jarvis put up both sets of directions.

"Thank you, Jarvis."

*

The shrink, as Tony calls her, is a nice older woman. She has a heavy New York accent that Steve finds comforting.

She asks him a few questions. When he tries to explain, Steve gets all tangled up. She's not like the SHIELD therapist, who soothed him when he got too upset and let him sit there until he could get himself back under control. Instead, Dr Katz asks him if he gets this way often. No, hardly ever, Steve tells her. Well, except yesterday.

"Then let's try something else," Dr Katz says. "Just tell me about yesterday."

Then it's all spilling out.

Dr Katz listens and listens and *listens*.

Finally, Steve's hoarse and his hands are over his face.

"Captain," her voice is still the same twanging New York and god, it makes him so *homesick.* She makes a note on her white pad of paper. Even the paper is so different now. "You talked before about not having a community."

Steve looks blearily at her. "I guess. Everyone I know is dead."

"You said your previous counselor suggested dating?" Dr Katz makes it sound like the previous counselor was an idiot. Steve thinks she was a nice lady, but she hadn't helped much. Of course, it's not like people who get trapped in ice for seventy years are common. It wasn't her fault that he was hopeless. Steve didn't even know what It's Just Lunch meant until she'd explained.

"Yes, ma'am."

Dr Katz looks at him. "What is your sexual orientation, Captain?"

Steve looks down, so tired.

"This is a safe space, Captain, and you've discussed some difficult topics. If that's something you'd rather not discuss, we can address it another time."

"It's OK." He has to talk about it sometime. "I prefer omegas. Certain kinds of omegas."

"Is he your specific type?" Her voice is non-judgmental, curious.

"Yes. Yes, ma'am, he is." Steve winds his fingers together, twists them tight. "Very much so."

"Does that make it more challenging? Less? Something else?"

"In my old world, I'd just get to have him. I used to think that. We talked about it." Steve snorts. "But once I thought about it, I realized how wrong it was."

"Oh?"

"In my old world, he'd have been married with three kids by now. Bonded, claimed, and I'd never have met him at all. Well, maybe if he was French, he'd have joined the Resistance and--never mind. But--he's where he is now. I like him." Steve throws himself back in his chair, drapes his hands over his face and groans. "I don't want him to be with me just because I'm stupid Captain America. Or because we're stuck on a team together. I want him to like me. Be with me because he wants to. How stupid is that?"

"It's not stupid. It's human."

Steve doesn't have the heart to explain that he's not sure he's really human anymore. Humans don't live in ice for seventy years.

"Captain, I'd like to give you some exercises."

That's familiar. Steve's good with exercises. "Yes, ma'am."

"They're going to be challenging. Since your first goal is to gain better control in a very specific situation, I'm going to have you sit down and list fifty things you could do instead."

"Instead of what?" Steve asks.

"You said that when you smelled his blood in a combat situation, your possessive and mating instincts were aroused. That you are OK with examining him for injuries, but that trying to pressure him to have immediate sexual intercourse with you is not OK."

"Um." This era sure is bold. "Yes, ma'am."

"What do you think would be acceptable, in that situation? If you were aroused and afraid for him, what would be a good thing to do?"

"I'm not sure," Steve says. Tony's kind of a puzzle. He hadn't seemed to mind taking off his clothes, but Steve's comment about Pepper, which would have been OK in polite company if he'd phrased it better, had driven Tony to fury.

"Then think about it. If you're not sure, you might ask him. But you're going to make a list, at least fifty, of safe things you could do instead."

"OK." Steve understands, but he's not sure it'll really work that way. He's not going to be able to play Parcheesi if Tony's *hurt*.

"Captain," Dr Katz says firmly.

Steve drags himself out of the imagery of Tony, hurt.

"We're also going to work on your arousal level in general. I'm going to help you with some breathing exercises. You're going to learn to relax."

"I'm not very good at relaxing, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"I've worked with much worse, trust me."

*

Steve finds Dr Katz's therapy a lot more exhausting than SHIELD's. Tony's got him scheduled for at least an hour and a half every day, and his committee meetings have all mysteriously been rescheduled, cancelled, or postponed to make holes in his time to accommodate the therapy.

Despite Tony's work on Steve's schedule, Tony himself hasn't been home for a good two weeks. Steve knows Tony comes and goes, but this is deliberate. Tony's letting Steve's hormones, and Steve, cool off.

Sometimes, Steve can tell that Tony's been home at least briefly--the air smells different, some of Tony's things have been moved, there's some of Steve's favorite meatloaf in the frig to be heated up, there's a stack of new art books by Steve's door. But Tony himself hasn't been seen.

Barton and Romanoff are gone, too. Romanoff's on assignment, but Barton keeps getting hauled off by various scary looking people in suits. It doesn't matter how many tests the experts run, no one can figure out what Loki did. If they don't cool it soon, Steve is going to have talk to Fury. Barton's been through enough. Steve also has an ugly suspicion that the suits want to learn how to replicate what Loki did. Steve thinks maybe Tony's self-professed paranoia is wearing off on him.

On Wednesday, Steve almost finds himself wishing for a villainous attack after the latest counselling session. It's not that Dr Katz makes him talk about things. It's always up to him how much to share. Once he does share, then they decide whether he's going to do something about whatever it is. Or not.

That's something SHIELD just didn't address. So your entire family's been wiped off the map. Here's a brochure for It's Just Lunch so you can meet some new romantic partners. That complete dissonance had been easy, as Dr Katz tells him. Why bother trying if the fix is sure to fail? None of SHIELD's fixes had been small enough to work.

Dr Katz explains that Steve's got to start somewhere. A family isn't going fall from the sky. If he wants community, he'll need to create it.

She doesn't let him get away with saying that's too hard, either, because she always builds on what he did before. If he built the Howling Commandos in a war zone, he can build a community for himself in peacetime New York. She gets him to talk about how he did it before, then she finds a way for him to do it again in the now.

His assignments are small. So small he can't possibly wiggle out of them, as she puts it. Today, he was supposed to talk to a clerk about the weather. Steve had to go to three separate coffee shops before he could get up the courage, but he managed it.

Now all he wants to do is flop on the couch in a puddle of spent panic.

When the elevator opens onto the common area floor, Steve knows that Tony is home.

Not just come and gone, but home.

Steve closes his eyes in relief, then forces himself to walk down the short hallway to the living room.

Tony's sprawled on the comfiest couch. He's looking at Steve, curious, but not afraid. Already, Tony's features are painfully familiar. Steve can tell that Tony's lost weight again--

at least another five pounds, and he doesn't have it to lose. His cheeks are hollowed, but his eyes aren't as tired as Steve expects. Tony was upstate then, not in California.

"Afternoon, gorgeous," Tony says. "Come sit with us."

That's when Steve sees that Tony isn't alone. Curled in the circle of Tony's forge-scarred arm is a small child. Steve can't tell if it's a boy or a girl, but it's cute. Soft brown hair, big green eyes, bright child's clothing. The child is looking at Steve by peeking around Tony's shoulder. Absently, he strokes the child's hair. Suddenly, the child darts back into the strong circle of Tony's arm, snuggles into his chest, hiding.

Steve has no earthly idea what to do.

He'd prepared to talk to Tony. He's actually not bad with kids. But this is just unexpected, and the three double-shot mochas with whip and sprinkles (it's what Tony orders sometimes) from all the different cafes for his therapy exercise are suddenly like a weight in his stomach.

"Hey gorgeous, grab us a beer and a fresh pacifier from the freezer?"

Steve flees to the kitchen like the hounds of hell are after him. He has no idea what a pacifier is or why it lives in the freezer (you never know with Tony), but he hopes it will take a while to find.

"Captain, Sir would likely prefer a ginger soda. The pacifiers are in the plastic tupper to your left."

Steve checks, and yes, of course there are several brightly colored nipple-shaped devices in the tupper.

"Do we have any saltines, Jarvis?" Steve asks.

"Second shelf, Captain."

Steve puts some on a plate and carries everything back to Tony. The child is now hiding under a blanket, tucked against Tony's side. The sight makes Steve's heart hurt. He offers Tony the plate of crackers.

"What the fuck is this?"

"Saltines."

Tony stares at them like the crackers are from Mars. "Huh. Thanks."

The stock reports are running on the TV, muted, but Steve thinks that Tony isn't watching them for some reason. He's not paying all that much attention to Steve, either. No electronics, no devices, no music. Tony's just looking at the wall, lost in thought. Odd.

"Sit, gorgeous. I'm not gonna bite."

Steve sits, a little awkward, on the side that isn't taken up by toddler. "Who's your friend?"

Tony's long fingers brush the top of the blanket. It squirms a little. "This is Liam. Liam Aiden Andrews. Want to say howdy to my friend Steven, Liam?"

The squirming intensifies as the child curls into Tony.

"OK, sweetheart. Maybe later. Steven's going to just have a beer with me, though. You got time." Tony curls his arm more protectively around the blanket wrapped bundle.

Steve's heart clenches. God, it just hurts to see Tony like this. Who is the child? There's so much of Tony's life that Steve just never knows. "I brought you a ginger beer."

"Oh, good. Yeah, I gotta work later." Tony doesn't move to take it. His long lashes almost drape his cheeks. It's the concentrating look. Steve could probably dance naked on the table and he wouldn't notice. But there are a few things Tony will do when he's like this. Acting on automatic.

Steve pops off the cap, offers it again, almost in Tony's hand. Tony takes it and drinks absently. "Rogers, have you heard anything about there being problems at Penn Station?"

"No," Steve says honestly. "I was down that way today."

"When?"

"About an hour and a half ago."

Tony looks down at the child, gives him an absent kiss, looks at Steve. "Sorry. I've been distracted. Therapy, huh?"

"Yeah. Tony, what about Penn--"

Tony shakes his head sharply, looks at the child, mouth tight. Steve *knows* that look, recognizes it. Steve's mom made that exact same expression. Not in front of these kids, they're too young, I'll tell you when they're in bed.

"How's it going?" Tony asks.

Penn Station is out, but defrosted soldiers with mental problems are OK? "It's harder than it looks."

"I thought you were going to collapse with exhaustion before you made it to the couch today."

"Felt that way," Steve admits.

"Homework's a bitch, isn't it?" Tony drinks some more of his ginger beer, and his voice is sympathetic.

"You've done it?"

Tony snorts. "Ohhhh yeah. Years of it. I gotta tell you, fighting aliens is easier. Sometimes way easier."

"It's not in your file."

"The aliens or the shrink?" Tony sets down the soda and takes some crackers, breaking them into absent perfect squares, playing with his food. "Yeah, yeah, I know, shrink. Guess I'm surprised."

"Maybe they thought it was none of my business."

Tony gives him a look of pity. "You're cute, Rogers. Maybe they were too busy writing up all the people I've banged."

"Tony," Steve hisses, tipping his head at the toddler.

Tony's eyebrows go up. "As opposed to his momma, who's working at O-gasm? Yeah, Liam's never heard that word before. But seriously, what did they put in the file you got?"

"Not as much as they should have." Steve frowns at him. "Please tell me it's not really called O-gasm."

"Would I lie to you, gorgeous?" Tony's eyes are the same sparkling brown, dancing as they tease Steve.

"Yes, but probably not about that." Good grief. "Liam isn't Honey's is he?"

Tony looks appalled. "Good lord, no. Liam's momma is Jacob."

"At the--?" Steve asks.

Tony nods. In Steve's day, most of the omegas working those places presented as female. Most but not all. It's kind of interesting to think that Steve's own personal preferences might be modern, for a change.

"Jacob has to work tonight, so Liam's hanging out with us. We're going to make cookies."

"I like cookies," Steve offers. "I make pretty good snickerdoodles."

Tony looks him up and down. "Hidden depths. I like it. I'd have pegged you for a chocolate chip man."

"They're good, too. You just seem like you'd like snickerdoodles." Steve doesn't know why. Tony likes his coffee in about eighteen different complicated combinations, many of which Steve can't decipher at all.

"They're my favorites, but nobody makes them right."

"Oh?"

"When I was at school, Na Freddericks taught home ec." Tony pauses. "You're not going to rat out my cookie making ability or anything, right? I just did it for the chemistry."

"Your secret's safe with me."

Tony eyes him again. "I guess since you're an American icon and all. She said they only taste good if you use real butter."

"Of course you use butter. What else would you use?"

Tony pats his hand. "That's what I always say, Steven, but the modern world is full of culinary abominations."

"Seriously, Stark, what else could you use?" Sure, war time recipes sometimes included substitutions, but nobody had enough to butter and sugar to be making many cookies. Substitutions were for supper dishes, not desserts. Steve guesses maybe you could use lard, but it wouldn't taste right.

"Applesauce. Oats. Oil. Margarine. Yogurt."

"You are just making that up," Steve says. "People do not put yogurt in their cookies."

"Jarvis?" Tony says, amused. "Care to appall the good Captain?"

"While I cannot myself taste the difference in ingredients, I can confirm that modern cookery uses many different wet ingredients to replace solid fats. These include Sir's aforementioned selections, but also dates, bananas, sweet potatoes, coconut oil or coconut butter, agave nectar--that's a thick liquid from a cactus, dried prunes reconstituted with water--"

"Stop!" Steve says. "Stop! Oh my gosh, Jarvis."

Tony's laughing helplessly. "Your face at the cactus. Priceless. I'm glad you're home, Steven."

"I would be, too, if it wasn't for the prunes. What is wrong with people today, Tony?"

"Not enough fiber?" Tony asks. "Oh god, never mind."

Steve gives him a worried look. "I don't want to know, do I?"

Tony laughs some more. "You really don't."

*

It's good, being home.

Tony does make cookies with Liam, after Liam finally wakes up from his nap. Tony keeps Liam on his hip while he's working, and they stir everything together. Steve has to hold the bowl because Liam stirs the spoon with both hands together, getting sugar-butter fluff

everywhere. Tony doesn't seem to mind the mess, either, and he licks the spoon with as much appreciation as Liam.

Liam likes chocolate chip, so that's what Tony makes.

There's also a simple chicken and pasta dish that Liam eats while the cookies are baking.

The rest of the evening, Tony plays with Liam, stretched out on his belly on a big blanket on the floor, while Steve reads a book. One of the living room closets has toys. Steve tries not to think too much about that, but then Tony's talking to Liam about meeting another little boy, who Tony thinks Liam will like a lot.

"Bebe's little boy," Tony tells Liam, taking the offered giraffe puppet and making it dance across the mountain of blocks. "Jamieson. He comes over to my house to play on Thursdays, sometimes, with Miss River."

Liam tucks a zebra into Tony's hands. "I guess that would be OK."

"Yeah?" Tony asks. He's watching Liam out of the corner of his eye as he moves two stuffed lemurs into a dance.

"Yeah." Liam takes one of the lemurs when Tony offers it, does his own dance, humming. "Is he like me?"

Tony looks down for a moment, eyes hidden behind his dark long lashes. "Like us? No."

"Oh." Liam's lemur stops dancing. "Like you friend, then."

Tony's back is tense, and Steve suddenly has no idea what to say. It never occurred to him that the child was also an omega, or that Tony would be familiar, while Steve would be--what? Strange? Different? Scary?

"Like my friend, Steven," Tony agrees. "But you don't have to meet him if you don't want to. Are we gonna move it move it?"

"OK." Liam grabs his lemur, and Tony doesn't bring up Jamieson again.

Chapter End Notes

I suspect some people are going to be curious about Tony's actions here. You won't find this out for a while, and it doesn't occur to Steve. I'm putting this in a Rot13 code, so if you're curious, you can find out what Tony was up to. (To decypher, go to www.rot13.com and paste in the below text.)
Gbal unq bar bs uvf frpergnevrf frg hc Fgrir'f nccbvagzragf. Ivn gur frpergnel/jbex beqre, Gbal pna purpx ba Fgrir'f cebterff ng orvat fnsr/hafnsr gb or va Gbal'f cerfrapr, gb or rkcbfrq gb onggyr pbaqvgvbaf ntnva, rgp. Gur qbpgbe jevgrf fubeg ercbegf: Cngvrag

fubhyq pbagvahr gb or rkphfrq sebz urnil pbzong qhgl jura cbffvoyr. Cngvrag fubhyq or nyybjrq gb yvir jvgu N.R. Fgnex Rgp. Gbal qbrfa'g pner nobhg UVCCN, naq abeznyyl ur jbhyq whfg unpx Fgrir'f svyr, ohg ur'f phevbhfyl eryhpgnag gb qb gung gb Fgrir sbe fbzr varkcyvpnoyr ernfba, qrfcvgr uvf hfhny pyvavpny cnenabvn.

Gbal unf gur frys-cerfreingvba vafgvapg bs n qehax yrzzvat va n uheevpnar, ohg ur jbhyqa'g rkcbfr Yvnz vs ur jnf jbeevrq nobhg Fgrir.

Chapter 34

By seven thirty, Liam is fading. Tony picks him up and swings him over his shoulder while Liam giggles. Steve thinks that's all he going to see of Tony tonight, but not quite an hour later, Tony pads back into the living room.

His jeans have a few damp spots and he's wearing a different shirt and fresh socks. When he sees Steve looking, he says, "Rubber duckies got out of control."

"Shouldn't you be--I don't know, nearby?" As soon as he says it, Steve realizes it's probably rude.

Tony doesn't seem to mind, though. "Jarvis will tell me. He's better than a baby monitor. God, what a day."

Tony flops back on the couch, and he really does look tired.

Steve fetches some food. A glass of fresh juice and some more crackers, since Tony had only had a spoonful of cookie dough for supper. "Who's Jacob?"

"Pretty little bitch," Tony says, knocking back juice. He freezes. "Uh, sorry. I didn't say that."

"I've heard the word bitch before, Tony."

Tony eyes him. "It's slang for an extreme male omega who's pretty much androgynous now, OK? I'm not talking about a woman, here, Rogers. And don't repeat it."

Steve nudges the plate of crackers closer. "Because I swear so frequently. You're OK saying it, but it's not something other people should say?" He's not being judgmental, he's just curious. Tony's got a good handle on modern manners.

Steve isn't surprised when Tony fiddles with the crackers, then shoves them away without eating any. He's suspects Tony's having another upset stomach.

"I can say it because I am one. If I'd born a kid as young as Jacob, I could switch freely."

"Switch freely?"

"Be female or male, day by day, minute by minute. Do you actually like crackers? What is with this cracker shit?"

"It's what my mom always said was good for an upset stomach."

Tony eyes the crackers with deep distrust. He pokes one, then nibbles on it. "I guess I could eat it."

"I thought you were, um, strictly masculine," Steve says. There's something not quite right in picturing Tony as a woman. Oh, he's beautiful enough, and yes, with wider hips and slight breasts, Steve would not have thought twice, but Tony feels....masculine, or masculine omega. Not female, somehow. Steve hadn't realized Tony was, well. He should probably not think too much more about this.

Tony sets the glass of juice down, looks at it for a while. "Yes and no. I'm masculine, but I'm an extreme omega, Steven. I can bear children. If I do, I probably won't be able to keep the goatee."

Steve takes a cracker and eats it. Sometimes other people eating will remind Tony that food exists. "I knew plenty of omegas like that. Back home and in France. Masculine, but no facial hair, slightly wider hips, often wore mixed clothing."

"Yeah?" Tony sounds wary.

"It was a lot more common back then, I guess." Steve says. "Or maybe people just dress differently?"

"Masculine omegas lose some of their masculine characteristics if they bear children too early," Tony says. He puts his cracker back down. "I know a lot people don't like that. Caught between one thing and another. Never enough of either."

"Is that what people today say?" That's something Steve's learning from Dr Katz. How to ask open ended questions, rephrase, clarify.

"Some of them." Tony moves the crackers into geometric patterns, changes it again. "I always wondered..."

"What?"

"You've changed bodies, right?"

Steve sips his own soda, hiding his expression. It's a trick he picked up from Tony, but he doesn't want Tony to stop talking just because Steve's nervous. "Yes, I have."

"Is it, I don't know, like not being yourself anymore?"

How to answer that? "Sometimes. I forget how big I am and crash into things, usually doorways because of my shoulders. I'm so much stronger now that I feel like a big ox. It took me a long time to relearn how to hold a pencil without breaking it by accident, and it took time for me to draw again."

Tony grunts, clearly thinking.

"But it's different for me," Steve says, watching him. Working with the doctor makes it easier to talk, but harder, too, because he's getting better at understanding people. Himself. Steve better understands how easily he can screw up.

"You got to be Captain America out of it."

"There's that, but it wasn't what I was thinking of."

Tony looks at him. Worn out engineer in damp jeans and fuzzy socks. "What were you thinking of?"

"I got a choice." Steve sips his soda. "A really specific choice."

"They didn't know what the heck that stuff was going to do to you, Steven. You could have just died."

"It was still a deliberate conscious choice. I wanted to go to war. People die in war."

Tony knocks back the last of his juice. "Childbirth, too."

"Yes." Steve's watching the screen where the stocks are still scrolling. "Tony, I know this is none of my business, but why are you asking about this now?"

"Jacob's pregnant again."

"Liam's momma." It's the word Tony used. That's not what Steve's more formal books say, or the slang he grew up with--Liam's dam, like Jacob is a mare.

"Yeah. Stupid bitch doesn't know the daddy. Again." Tony slams the juice down. "Like I can fucking talk, right, but I didn't get myself knocked up by strangers twice in a goddamn row."

Steve isn't sure what to do with Tony's anger or with what Tony's saying. "Is Jacob going to have the baby?"

"Christ only knows." Tony kicks hard at the coffee table and the crackers scatter. "I hate it. He can barely hold his job at O as it is, hooking to make up the difference, and god knows he can make extra because of the pregnancy but it's not like that will last more than a couple months."

"People pay extra for pregnancy?" Steve should be focusing on the problem, which sounds serious, but his mind stuck on that. It's just wrong. "To help pay for the child care?"

Tony looks at Steve like he's lost his mind. "You are an odd mix of innocence and kink, old man. They pay extra because an omega in early pregnancy tends to get horny as hell and they've got the pheromones to prove it. Survival mechanism. Stay by us, we're handy to have around, why not spear that woolly mammoth for us, we'll make it worth your while, big caveman."

"You--really? But they're pregnant!"

Tony fishes under the couch and pulls a flask of whiskey out of a drawer, plus two glasses. He splashes some into both, scoots one over. "Dr Katz hasn't made you read the back pages of a city weekly yet."

"No," Steve says. "Why?"

Tony shakes his head but doesn't say, just drinks.

Steve doesn't press. "So what are you going to do?"

"I just don't fucking know, Steven. Christ, what a mess." Tony finishes his glass and slams it on the table.

This must be what Tony's been thinking about all afternoon. Not Steve's return. Not Fury. Not the WSC. "Liam's very cute." Steve isn't sure what else to say, but he wants Tony to know he can keep talking. "Have I just missed him before?"

"No." Tony sounds weary again. "I'm not actually that close to Jacob, but I wanted to take a look myself."

"At Liam?"

"Yeah." Tony grabs the flask again. His knuckles are white. "Jacob's really trying. He adores Liam, but life isn't just about love."

"Sometimes it's about having enough food," Steve offers softly, because this is something he understands. Kids who are loved, but who are too expensive for their families to feed. "Or a place to live."

"Yeah, and--before you ask, yes, I've been trying to get Jacob into a better situation, but he has zero fucking skills, the work ethic of a three-toed sloth, and the social maturity of a Monarch butterfly. I got him a goddamn phone support job and he showed up in a fishnet tank!"

"I don't know what that is, Tony."

"Ho outfit." Tony waves his glass. "He looked like Slutto Ken to Bratz Barbie."

Steve has to just guess, but he thinks he gets the picture. "Did they fire him?"

"Not that time." Tony drinks, sighs. "I don't know. Liam's got some delays."

Steve isn't going to press on the exact meaning of the words. He can look it up later. "He seemed a little shy, but he was in a new place with unfamiliar people."

Tony slouches down in the couch. "Kid's spent most of his life in new places with unfamiliar people. I got him tonight because night before last Jacob took him to work, which isn't as bad as you'd expect Rogers, so don't flip, he just played in the dressing room with the girls, but still, he should have been asleep, and then Jacob tells me his upstairs neighbor who usually sits Liam on Wednesdays can't because her son's girlfriend is out on bail and needs to stay, and so there's not enough room!"

Steve sips his whiskey and crosses his feet. "Sounds like my old life."

"You did not grow up in strip clubs, Rogers, I have read your file." Tony's sarcasm is dry as ever, but he doesn't sound mean. Just interested.

"Not strip clubs, but hospitals and neighbors' places and the back lot and our shared room with strangers and sometimes a garment factory or behind a store counter. Bucky, too. Lots of people I knew grew up like that. Stuck in back rooms out of sight while mom worked, staying with whoever could have us, playing in the streets when we had to."

"Did anything work?"

Steve thinks about it. Tries to remember the happiest endings. "There was an old lady. Mrs Hennessey. I guess she wasn't so old, really, but when I was a kid she seemed ancient. There was this girl, Yvette, who had a baby on the wrong side of the sheets."

Tony turns, and Steve thinks this is one of his favorite things about Tony. How he can just turn and focus like what you're saying has his undivided attention. It's unpredictable, what will catch his fancy, but when it happens, it's unmistakable.

"She was an omega," Tony says. "Yvette."

"Yes. She moved in with Mrs Hennessey. Mrs H took care of the baby while Yvette worked. I don't think there was anything romantic there. They were just this strange little family. Yvette was like a girl herself. Tony, she couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen, really young, but she wanted to keep her son."

Tony's hand tightens on his glass unexpectedly. Steve knows Tony is never clumsy. He's not sure what's going on, but he decides to let it go. Not press, not yet.

"Some people said that she shouldn't have tried to keep it. You know, she should have done the honorable thing and given the baby to its sires. That they had a right, and they could offer him more than she ever could."

"Do you think they're right?" Tony is still staring at him, and Steve wonders how much of this is about Jacob. Whether some of it might be about Tony having kids someday.

"I think Yvette loved her son more than anything. He was a happy baby, and Mrs H loved him, too. It didn't matter if Mrs H wasn't his blood. Tony, I think if you can find a way to help Jacob keep Liam, you should do that."

"You think I should get him a Mrs Hennessey."

"You can't order people off the internet--no, wait, don't tell me if you can, I don't want to know if they sell nannies on Amazon. Maybe just keep an eye out for a situation where Jacob could have some more support and where Liam could be happy. Not every omega is going to--"

"To what, Rogers?" Tony says, interrupting, almost vibrating. The switch of attitude is startling, but Steve thinks he understands it.

"Not every omega is going to have a powerful backer in their corner," Steve finishes gently.

"Would you recognize one if you saw them?" Tony relaxes back into the couch.

"A powerful backer?"

Tony rolls his eyes. "A Mrs Hennessey. I'd ask Pepper, but she's out in Cali, and Honey's tried all her contacts."

"I might," Steve says cautiously. "I don't get out that much these days, but I'll look around and see what I can do."

Tony splashes more whiskey in his glass. "Thanks, Steven."

"You're welcome, Anthony."

Chapter 35

Tony's glad that Steve's home. He's spent most of his formative years living in a large boarding school's dorm, and at first Tony tells himself that Steve's presence makes home more homelike.

Except that when Natasha is home, Tony doesn't feel warm and fuzzy. Yes, she spied on him, but he's gotten over that (mostly). She's a lot kinder as Natasha than as Natalie Rushman. Tony's grown to like her.

But when SHIELD sends her off to foreign countries to get intel or kill people, Tony doesn't especially pine.

It's embarrassing to admit that he kind of pined when he was on his self-imposed Steve-diet.

Just a little.

Steve is a considerate housemate. He puts his laundry in the hamper, he does his dishes, he plays poker like a champ, and he never eats the last of the chips without asking Jarvis to order more.

Not that Tony can even eat chips right now. But Barton can, and if Tony wants the occasional single damn potato chip, the bag better not be fucking empty. If Barton's been at them, there's nothing but stale salty dust left. If Steve's been at them, the bag is neatly folded and clipped with a closepin.

It's kind of strange to have to have Steve around, because Tony's never spent so much time with an alpha in his life. Not since he lived with his parents, and his dad's sure as fuck doesn't count (not in Tony's book).

Tony's life out of school has always tended toward chaos, a carefully calibrated mix of workshop, SI research, debauchery, babysitting, engine repair, and insomnia. Now with added super-heroing. Tony often staggers into the living room to shake off a bad nightmare or a bout of especially awful nausea, just so he can flop into an armchair in a room where Steve happens to be.

There's something about Steve's company that soothes the ragged edged nerves that jangle when Tony's alone.

Tony keeps a box of small electronics and fine tools next to the armchair he likes best. It's got the best lighting for delicate work, and it has nothing to do with it being the closest individual chair to where Steve likes to sit on the couch.

One night, Tony was fixing a walkman (for historical interest only) in his lap while Steve read aloud interesting bits from a book about the early history of New York.

Barton came in, looked at them, rolled his eyes, and walked back out.

Tony's still not sure what the hell had upset his delicate sensibilities, but ever since, Barton insists on calling the electronics 'Tony's knitting'. Natasha thinks that's funny, but whatever. They can make fun, and when their small electronics die, see if Tony fixes them. (He still will, of course, because no one else is allowed to touch the team's electronics but Tony.)

Steve's doctor thinks that modern over-stimulation worsens Steve's issues, so the whole house goes easy on media. Jarvis keeps track of how long they display movies, listen to music, watch TV, talk on the phone, use cell phones and computers and tablets and laptops. There are strict limits for how long any of that can play on the common floor and the floor where Steve's bedroom is, so a lot of the time, it's quiet.

Tony doesn't mind as much as he expects, partly because his headaches have been much worse lately. Still, Tony has always coped with the world by turning up the volume. There's only so much quiet domesticity he can take.

On Friday, when Honey calls and invites him to see her latest show, then go dancing, Tony thinks about it.

"We haven't had a night out in aaaaaaaaaages," she tells him.

Which is true. Tony has been too busy, too queasy, or too sleep deprived. "OK, but I'm not going to Xxxotica." It's what he always says.

"Are you looking to score?" Honey asks.

Tony's not honestly sure. He hasn't been feeling that well, but he loves dancing. Today is the best he's felt in a long time. If he's going to get dolled up, if he watches Honey's truly excellent moves on stage, and if they go dancing together, he's going to want to get fucked. Nice and hard.

"What if I was?" Tony asks slyly.

"I still think charity starts at home," she says, winking. Honey-speak for screw Steve's brains out. "But if you don't wanna, I know a guy."

"Don't you always?"

"This one's special. Just your type."

"Catch?"

"He's a pro. He's gonna want a paycheck."

Tony shrugs. He doesn't care about that. "Deal."

In celebration of Honey's being the Friday night headliner at Opulence, Tony has Happy take them in the limo. Tony dolls himself up from top to toe. He's lost enough weight that he's a little worried about how his arms will look, but he checks himself over in the mirror. No, he's still got it. He's just leaner and with the slighter shoulders, he's a bit more androgynous.

Perfect for clubbing with Honey.

If he's going to carry off these pants, he's going to need to shave mighty close to the goods. Might as well go all the way, so Tony shaves absolutely everything from the waist down.

The pants show off his hip bones, and he has to add a wide belt to make sure they stay on. The boots have heels. The only tricky part is the arc reactor. The scars on his chest are ugly, the damn thing glows in the dark, and he doesn't want to be recognized. Not tonight.

He wants to be himself.

In the end, Tony picks a cropped shirt that's short enough to show off plenty of skin, but thick enough (and lined in the right place) to cover the arc reactor.

All he needs to do is finish his makeup, add some jewelry, dab on some Oomph cologne and he's good to go. He blows himself a kiss in the mirror, puts on his shades, and strolls out to the living room to wait for Happy.

There's a startled sound. "*Jesus*, Stark."

"What?" Tony turns. Oh, it's just Barton. Does the guy ever eat anything but cereal? Jarvis has to keep ordering overly-sweet kids cereal by the caseload. Cap'n Crunch this time. Why not just pour sugar in your mouth and have done with it?

"It's just, uh, not your usual look." Barton says. He sounds a little strangled.

"I'm going clubbing." Jarvis pings the elevator to tell him Happy's downstairs. "Don't wait up for me, dear!"

All he hears behind him is a muttered "Christ."

*

Honey puts on a great show, as always, but this is definitely one of Tony's favorites. She starts out in a white wedding outfit that also includes some kind of swans' wings and a headdress, a la Vegas Showgirl, and eventually she's slithering up and down the center pole in nothing but her g-string. The show ends with a series of slow, sexy backbends and slinky moves.

Tony meets her backstage, so he can help her touch up her makeup. All the other dancers crowd around for a good gossip. Tony gets caught up on the news, sneers with disapproval where appropriate, gets kissed so enthusiastically by Renee that he has to retouch his own makeup, and then he and Honey are arm in arm, laughing their way to the car.

Happy smiles fondly at them. Happy and Honey go way back. "Hey, boss, where to?"

"Tonyyyyy, let's go to X," Honey says, as she always does.

There's always lots of action at X, and the music is good, nice and rough, but it's their tradition to argue about where to go, so Tony doesn't agree immediately.

"Come on," Honey says. "I've got a friend who's working a cage there."

Happy tucks them in the limo, and Tony pours them drinks while they decide. Tony offers Playland, which Honey hates because it's way too prone to underage kids from Westchester, which is sometimes true, but not as true on Fridays. Honey counters with CeCe's, which does actually have the best dance music. It's expensive and classy and exclusive. Looking like this, the bouncers will fall over themselves to let the two of them in.

It will also, sadly, be filled with the occasional wealthy alpha jerk looking to pull.

Tony's taps on the glass. "X, Happy."

"Yes, boss," Happy says with a sigh.

*

Since they always wind up at Xxxotica, that's where Honey told her pro to show up for Tony's entertainment. Tony should want him. He's a broad-shouldered extreme alpha with a nice smile and great moves. The real pheromones pouring off him are a bonus, and Tony suspects the guy's cock is nice too, since the pants the guy's wearing leave nothing to the imagination. Tony slips him a fold of bills, shakes his head, and drags Honey back on the dance floor.

Dancing with Honey is both arousing and safe. They both love to dance, and they're both good at it. After a couple hours, they might as well be having sex with a few scraps of clothes on, but Honey murmurs into Tony's ear that she's kind of hungry.

Tony obligingly finds Happy (who does not like to dance, but who always lurks inside these clubs in case of creeps). They pile into the limo and if Tony and Honey are in a comfortable tipsy sprawl, well, that's why Tony has a stretch limo.

Happy gets them in the elevator at the house with a warm "Goodnight, boss."

As the doors slide shut, Honey asks Jarvis to play them a little music on the way up. When the doors slide open at the common floor, they're entwined, laughing, dancing as only a stripper and someone with thirteen years of dance lessons can. Tony can smell the sharp bite of Clint's favorite whiskey (blended, which is a crime against booze) and the light sweetness of Steve's favorite cherry soda.

Tony's hears some kind of clink, maybe a glass, but he's too busy laughing as Honey drags him forward, still half-entwined with him.

"Oh, hey Steve!" Honey says, singing it out. "Hey, Clint!"

Tony lets her tug him by the wrist all the way to the poker table, where Steve and Clint are playing cards. Tony's been aroused off and on this evening, mostly on. The dancing is always good with Honey, and sometimes he'll slide under, accidentally. So comfortable with her, moving in sync, he'll be like he was with Alex, years ago. Submissive in what Alex had always called a sweet, soft way.

Honey's telling Clint to deal them in for Chrissakes and Tony's trying to pull out a chair for them with his free hand, because she's still got his wrist in her tight little grip.

Suddenly, Tony feels warmth at his side, and the chair's sliding out. Tony turns, and it's Steve, who has the most unexpected look on his face.

Shock. Desire. Delight.

"Hey, Tony," Steve says, holding the chair for him.

Tony looks down at Steve's hand holding the chair out, then up through his lashes. "Hey, Steven. For me?"

"Yeah. Sit. Play cards with us." Steve's voice is soft, but now Tony can smell the arousal.

It's nothing like it was after that battle, when it had been mixed with fear and adrenaline. Tonight, Steve smells like his usual sunshine and clean breeze, but there's something else there, too. Something Tony can't place. Something nice. He slides easily into the chair, but Honey still has him by the wrist. Tony lets her, because he likes it.

Tony's drunk enough to want to *know*, not just guess, not just rely on Steve's contradictory words from their fight before. So Tony does what he does best. He pushes. He looks at his own wrist, held by her, then over at Steve, using his body language to draw Steve to look where Tony's being held captive, see it, understand it. Tony's not sure what he's expecting--disapproval, anger, disgust.

But Steve's already focused on Tony's wrist, held absently by Honey. His nostrils flare, and the arousal scent goes suddenly heady.

Honey must be able to smell it, because she looks over her shoulder at Steve. "Isn't Tony gorgeous like this?"

Tony should feel embarrassed, but he does have a little teensy bit of a kink about being the center of attention. Being shown off. Honey knows him all too well.

"He's beautiful," Steve says, still looking at where Tony's being held still.

"You should see him dance. He can follow anywhere." Honey says. "After he watched my show, he took me to Xxxotica." Her laughter is low, smoke-rough. "You would not believe the offers I got."

"I bet," Steve says. He looks up, over Tony's arm, his shoulders, down his chest, all the way down the faint lines of his hip bones, shown off by the insanely low-cut pants. When Tony's sitting, it's really obvious that he has absolutely nothing on underneath and that he's shaved.

Honey cocks her hip and sits on the card table, half-turned away from Steve, looking at Clint, with her long long dancer's legs crossed for Clint's edification and amusement.

Tony feels the desire swirling in his belly. Not pressing, not scary, just good. Honey's got him, and she's like Alex. He's safe. Steve's arousal smells good, clean. Clint's busy flirting

and looking down Honey's top. It's ok for Tony to just drift, let Steve look at him. Not the way Tony is at galas or parties or performing. Just how he is when he's himself.

Honey's hand slides up Tony's arm, to his shoulders, toys there with the shoulder seam of his shirt. It's her way of making an invitation. If Tony wants, she'll seduce him, right here. Show him off. They're friends, and sometimes, for various reasons, they'll play. But this is different. Tony isn't sure why, but it feels like a gift.

Tony doesn't want her to hand him over, not tonight, but he does think, just maybe, that she's right. Tony wants to know what Steve thinks of him, the real him, not the mask. So, still moved from the dancing and a little loose from the bourbon, Tony turns his head and nuzzles Honey's small hand.

She cups his jaw, strokes his face, runs her fingers through his shaggy bangs. He should get it cut, it's growing out, but it feels good when she curls a lock over her forefinger and tugs sharply on it. Tony leans closer to her, obeying without a thought.

When her hands trail down his scalp to play with the fine hairs at the nape of his neck, Tony hears Clint say, "Jesus."

Steve inhales sharply.

Tony's eyes are shut in pleasure. Neck play is something he doesn't do with many people, and he has a heavy startle reflex about it most of the time. Honey's always allowed to touch him this way, though, and god, it's good. When Tony's well and truly aroused, she scrapes her nails down his neck, and the pain is followed by his soft moan, because it's so perfect. She knows his body, she knows what he likes, she knows how far she can take him and he'll still feel safe.

She plays with him for a little bit, alternating pain and pleasure, while Tony goes more and more pliant for her, makes more soft sex sounds, little moans and gasps.

When Clint clears his throat again, Honey withdraws her fingers from his nape. Tony makes a soft wistful noise, eyes still closed. She cups his cheek, strokes her thumb against his jaw, gives him a slow lingering kiss. He moans into her mouth, willing. All she says is, "Night, Tony."

"Night," he tells her.

In the dark behind his lids, Tony can hear Honey hop off the table, grab Clint, move off, but only down the hallway. Honey will make sure he gets to bed safe before she gives Clint his tumble between the sheets.

Tony knows he should open his eyes now, but part of him's still afraid. Steve's from a whole different generation. They didn't even have kink books back then, did they?

What if Steve is disgusted by him, by how submissive Tony gets, how much Tony likes the mix of giving in and being hurt and used for pleasure? Steve had been so disgusted at him coming home smelling of blood and sex, though Steve later denied it. But Tony trusts Honey,

and Tony needs to know, and if Tony's never been very brave, well, he's also never backed down. Not with his dad, not with Obie, and not now.

He opens his eyes, still half-caught in the sleepy spell of desire Honey placed him under.

Steve's looking right back, nostrils flared, lips damp like he just licked them. The naked want on his face is shocking.

"So," Tony says, almost slurring the words he's so far under, "not disgusted?"

Steve shakes his head. Tony can't look away from him, because Steve seems almost rapt. The only other thing that Tony's seen Steve look at that way is his shield, right before a fight.

"Tony," Honey calls. "Don't forget to drink your water before you go to bed!"

Steve closes his eyes on the word bed. When he opens them, he says, "I would love to see you dance."

"Come with us, next time," Tony offers.

"Maybe I will." Steve slides his chair back. "Tony?"

Tony raises an eyebrow, still not moving because it doesn't feel right, not yet. He wants permission.

"I'd like to give you a goodnight kiss. May I?"

Tony shivers. "Yeah, I'd like that."

Steve doesn't lean down. Instead, he slides to his knees on the floor between Tony's knees, putting himself at Tony's own height. His hands are large, but not calloused at all. Nothing like Tony's own scarred, work-rough hands, no matter how many manicures he gets. Steve cups Tony's face in his hands, gently, but very much holding him still.

The dominance of it, and the care, make Tony's neck shiver.

When Steve kisses him, it's not a soft brush of lips, it's a playful nip of sharp teeth in his lower lip and then Steve's kissing him for real. Good and hard, a heady mix of rough and sweet.

Tony loses himself in it, opens up, sucking on Steve's tongue, moaning, making desperate little needy sex noises.

Steve draws back way too soon, leans their foreheads together. "Goodnight, Tony."

Tony badly wants to just ask Steve to fuck him, right now, right here, this instant. He doesn't, but that's because he's just too damn pliant and submissive.

Steve stands up, strokes his knuckles down Tony's cheek, then leaves.

When he's gone, Tony lays his head on his arms and *whines*. It's a quiet, desperate little sex sound, and he hopes to hell Steve can't hear it, but god, he probably can.

Down the hall, Tony hears Honey and Clint move off.

Tony waits until they're gone before going to his own bed. For the first time in years outside a heat, he grabs a toy from his private box and does his best to fuck himself senseless. The toy isn't enough, it's not what he really wants, but to his own surprise, he comes easily, biting on his pillow as he works the toy as deep as it can go.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is a little darker, just fyi. For that reason, I am posting two chapters today. This one, and the followup. Sadly, that means I probably will not post a chapter tomorrow.

Tony half expects Steve to be weird the next day, but he isn't. Tony feeds everyone breakfast, including Clint, who's so often gone these days that Tony doesn't have his egg preferences nailed perfectly yet. Honey tells Tony about River's grades, and Steve goes off to his Saturday morning council meeting as usual.

Tony still has no earthly idea what he's doing with Steve, if anything, but for now he's going to just not think about it. They're still insanely busy, but at least Steve's cleared for combat again. Tony takes that as a good sign.

Clint, though, Tony's getting a little worried about Clint.

It's not that Tony's especially close to Barton. Sure, he's an amazing warrior, he has a smart mouth, and he doesn't screw with Tony's tech. But they don't have a lot in common. They both enjoy video games, but where Tony prefers cars and planes, Clint prefers first person shooters.

But there's something about Clint that Tony just likes.

Tony's first real friend outside of work and school is a hooker he picked up in a strip club, and Clint's best friend is an assassin. Tony's helped Honey on a few jobs, just as Clint helped Natasha. It's like Tony and Clint come from the same shared world of violence, betrayal, blood and sex, where their bodies are assets and today's all you've got.

Like Rhodey, Clint's a beta. The steadiness of him, the calm of his hands on bow or knife, that's part of what Tony likes about Clint.

It's the part that's slipping away, slowly but surely.

Tony is always suspicious of SHIELD, but even he can see why they're trying to figure out how Loki's hoodoo harmed Barton. The man was basically possessed, and he sure as hell wasn't responsible for his actions. But that doesn't change the fact that while Clint was under Loki's control, he started a fire fight that directly killed his bonded mate.

As promised, Tony set up protocols with Jarvis. If Clint's eyes glow, if Clint talks a certain way, if Clint matches certain video footage of himself from back then, Jarvis will take steps. A few of those steps are permanent, but some of them are not.

Tony's in the workshop fixing a repulsor when Jarvis cuts the music.

"Sir, Protocol 7 has been instituted. Agent Barton is in the elevator. I have told him you wish to play cards in the common area. He will be there shortly."

Tony drops his soldering iron. "Fuck. Where's Natasha?"

"I regret to say Agent Romanoff is still overseas. Should I contact SHIELD to recall her?"

"That will take too long. Where's Steve?"

"Captain Rogers is in Canada on a training exercise. He should be home later this evening. I could attempt to recall him, but the exercise is in a blackout zone."

Tony hates the blackout zone shit. He's sure Fury does it just to fuck with him, but admitting that Tony doesn't like to be out of touch with Steve for a measly couple of hours would be too humiliating. Besides, it might freak out Steve.

"I guess I'll be handling this. Thanks Jarvis. Do you know what this is about?"

Tony's asked Jarvis to be discrete about their private lives, unless it's an emergency. He wouldn't normally ask, but Protocol 7 means that, among other things, Clint's vital signs are sliding in and out of acceptable ranges. Some fairly serious shit is going down, and it's not due to battle stress.

"Sir," Jarvis sounds unusually hesitant, "my information indicates that today is the anniversary of Agent Barton's bonding to Agent Coulson."

Tony slams the elevator stop button. Oh Christ. "Don't allow him on the roof today. Promise me, Jarvis."

"I promise, Sir."

When Tony gets the elevator moving again, his stomach is in knots. This evening is going to be rough. "Cancel everything tonight, tomorrow, and the day after."

"Sir--"

"Fuck my other appointments, J."

"I was merely going to suggest you have me send an alert to Captain Rogers' cell phone. I believe he should be prepared for the situation when he returns. Perhaps he'll have some ideas."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's good. Do it."

*

They've been playing cards for a good long while and the table is surrounded by a soft haze of cigarette smoke. Tony's got Jarvis playing some early Stones, nice and bluesy, mellow. Tony's pulled out the really good booze, and they both have a crystal tumbler at their elbow. Clint isn't that fussy, but Tony has his little methods. The ancient peeling label on the bottle of hundred year old cognac gives Clint pause every times he pours. Tony's not averse to a good long drunk, but he also knows a suicidal depression when he sees one.

Tony's doing his best to balance them both on the edge of pleasantly hammered without tipping into sick as a dog.

So far so good.

Tony leans forward to grab the pad of paper they're using to write down their scores. Tony's winning, but not by that much.

"Say Stark?" Clint asks. "Can I ask you something?"

Tony writes down their respective scores, totals the numbers without having to think about it. "Sure."

"Can I see your neck?"

Tony looks up. Clint's slouched in his chair, but Tony's never seen him so serious. Tony glances up at the lamp that hangs over the table. Yes, when he leaned forward to get the pad of paper, the light would shine right on his scars.

In answer, Tony sets down the pencil. His hair is getting shaggy, but Tony just holds it up and back from the join of his jaw and neck, right under his ear, where the scars are. He turns and leans forward so that Clint can see it easily, directly under the light.

"Jesus," Clint says. "I'd heard--but I didn't think--"

"You can touch them if you want," Tony tells him. Clint's not interested because of sex, and frankly, Tony wouldn't care if he was. Tonight, Tony's willing to do nearly anything to keep Barton held to this world.

Clint's fingers are blunt-tipped, calloused from his work. Tony knows the fingers touching him belong to an assassin. These hands have killed people. Tony doesn't mind that, though. It's soothing. Not sexual, but very intimate.

They stay that way for a while, Clint exploring the line of Tony's history through his scars. After a while, Clint takes Tony's chin in his hand and tips his face the other direction. Tony obligingly holds his hair back so that Clint can examine the scars on the other side.

When Clint pulls his hands away at last, Tony sits back down, fluffs his hair back to its usual messy tangle.

"I've heard stories," Clint says. "But I've never seen anybody who's had it done. Look man, I'm not asking because of some hitting on you sex thing."

"It's OK, Barton." Tony pours them each another finger of cognac. "You can ask me about this." Even though, strictly speaking, Tony doesn't talk about this. Ever. Not even to his shrink. No one.

"Did it hurt?"

Tony swirls the booze in his glass, watching as it slides up, down, back and forth. "The bond? Or breaking it? Or are you talking about the scars themselves?"

"I don't even fucking know, man."

Fair enough. Tony makes a small whirlpool in his crystal tumbler, then he sets it back down.

"You don't have to say. I shouldn't have asked." Clint's brash, often obnoxious, but he's also perceptive.

"No, you're fine. I'm just trying to think how best to explain it." Tony buys time by knocking back more cognac. He takes out a cigarette, leans forward expectantly.

Clint flicks a lighter for him, and Tony drags in. The smoke is harsh and beautiful on his throat. Dry and perfect.

"You know I was bonded by several people, right?" Tony asks, making sure.

Clint's body goes into that calm breathing that he uses when he's hunting a target. "Yeah. I know."

Tony taps his temple with the forefinger of the hand holding his smoke, takes another long drag. "When I woke up, they were in there. It was like--" Oh, how to explain. Ah. "You ever been waterboarded?"

Clint's eyes flicker. "In training. Not for real."

"It's like that. You plunge down, struggling, and you can't breathe, know you need to, but breathing would draw the water in deeper, drown you. You want to scream, but you can't. All you can do is open your mouth and struggle, feeling the screams trapped in your throat, swallowed by the water. It's all you want, to breathe, but breathing will kill you. It's in your eyes and your mouth and your ears and your nose and when they yank you up again, it hurts someplace different, but no less bad, and you can't do a damn thing about it because then you're plunged back into it."

"Jesus."

Tony shrugs, squints at him through the smoke. "That bond was just like being held under. My bondmates were the water, and the bond was the air. Their touch was killing me, but I needed to open my mouth, draw in their poison, drown. It hurt."

Clint's jaw is tight. "How did you break it?"

"No idea." Tony takes another long drag. The sharp tobacco is so different from the dirty cave water that it makes it easier to breathe and the nicotine soothes him. "My memory of that time is pure shit. I can tell you what I do know."

Clint waits.

"They had to cut me open to do it. I was kind of a wreck, physically. You've probably read my file."

Clint goes even more still, which is a yes, Tony knows.

"So, given the drugs I'd been given at the party, and given the trickiness of breaking a bond...."

"No anesthesia," Clint says. "Jesus, Stark, no wonder you don't remember."

"I remember enough to tell you that breaking a bond hurts a lot worse than open heart surgery in a cave in Afghanistan. What happened to you wasn't your fault, Barton, and you're going to hurt for a while."

Clint grabs the bottle of cognac and splashes more into his glass. "How'd you make it out the other side?"

"Not sure I have." Tony holds out his own glass, and Clint pours some more in. "Not sure I ever will."

*

They drink and they talk and if the card playing is more for form than anything else, well, that's OK.

Tony's as drunk as he's been in years. At one point he just dumps his hand on the discard pile and says, "Tell me about him."

Clint is peering blearily at the cards in his own hand. It takes him a second to answer, and it's not the drink causing the delay. "Can't."

Tony grabs the cognac, pours more into Clint's glass. "Fucking tell me. You know what? You tell me how you bonded, I'll tell you what you want to know about how we broke mine."

Clint looks up from his sprawl, suddenly intent. "Thought you didn't remember."

"I remember flashes. You can have them. If you want." Tony frowns. "But I guess you probably don't. Why would you?" Clint's bond is already broken; medical miracle courtesy of Loki. He isn't going to need another broken bond, although...

"I want," Clint says. "I want. Yeah. I do." His words are disjointed, but sincere, like even saying them hurts.

Tony realizes he's going to have to go through with this fucking stupid rash promise. God, this is just like spiraling up into the sky, as high as he can go, then realizing even Jarvis leaves you when you hit atmosphere and the ice comes. Whoops.

Clint throws his cards onto the pile, shoves the cards and the board away. He puts his elbows on the table, leans on his forearms so he can see Tony clearly. He's a lot more interested in finding out what happened than Tony expects.

Tony watches the cognac in his glass slip against the sides of his glass as he raises it to his mouth. His hand is trembling, badly. "I was pregnant."

The whole time Tony talks, stumbling on words, stopping to stare at the spilled drink he can barely see because his eyes keep going wet, having to stop to let the shakes slide through him--the whole time, Barton is silent.

He waits with the deepest, calmest patience Tony has ever seen. A killer, coiled, predatory, back towards the shadows, hands in the light. Still.

Tony can't be still. He keeps having to move. His hands gesture, trying to drag on a cigarette, trying to brush his bangs out his eyes. Mostly failing at all of it.

He hadn't meant to, but he started Clint off with the smeared memories of the ambulance. The hard sounds of the machines blaring with beeps, the hands in gloves on his face, in his mouth, the smell of his rapists still on his body, the sickly sweet reek of the EMTs' terrified arousal.

"You were still in heat," Clint says, when Tony's realized he's got to put out the cigarette or burn his fingers.

"You have no idea how deep," Tony says. He tries to pick up the pack of Marlboro Reds twice, but he can't quite manage it. "Pumped full of every damn sex drug known to alphakind and some they probably invented just for me."

Clint takes the box in his competent fingers, slides out a single cigarette, lights it, and hands it to Tony.

Tony takes a long drag, exhales it all out before he tries again. "There's really something strange about having a memory of a middle-aged guy in a blue uniform with a huge stiffy in his pants and tears on his face as he's trying to get your oxygen mask on you."

Clint takes a long swallow of cognac, wincing at the burn. "Holy shit." Then he pours them both some more. Tony tells him of waking up at school, of Na Anderson's pen grading papers, of the faint bruises he thinks he caused. The loud chorus in his head, the strange swell of a belly already readjusting itself.

Tony has to brace his head on his hands when he tells Clint about the way he was still covered in them. The ripped skin, the bruises, dried slick and spit and blood and semen all over him, flaking and dried and itching and the ugly trickle and stickiness between his legs.

"They didn't wash you?" Clint's voice is full of quiet horror.

"Couldn't." He's trembling, a constant shiver. "I was in bad shape, and away from my newly bonded mates, and their smell was keeping me alive. Without it, I'd have gone insane. There were tests, back in the war, of bonding omegas hard, then removing their mates."

Clint's just breathing heavily. His eyes are flat and hard.

"So, they learned, they learned that if you keep the--" Tony's breathing catches.

"Just skip those words, Stark," Clint says, voice rough. "Fucking skip them."

Tony nods, even though it's stupid, he should be able to say them. "You leave us with whatever you can, if we've been bonded. Because we're so open, when we're like that, and we can't close off, so the pain will cycle worse."

Clint hands him a glass of water--not to his hand, but right at his mouth. "Drink it."

Tony takes a few long drinks and it helps. "So, when she asked me, what do you want, I said get them out of me. Do it, whatever it is, fucking do it."

The glass is pressed against his lip again, and Tony drinks. When Clint sets it down, it makes no sound on the table, but Tony sees that there's a faint crack in it. His vision keeps pulling in and out, but Tony ignores it.

"You have to understand," Tony says, looking right at him, "I was an animal. Not much left. Completely out of my mind. Crawled under the bed, tried to kill a nurse. Heard that later--gossip. But they-" His breathing is rough and strained, and his hands rub the edge of the arc reactor, soothing himself. "They just got down on the floor with me."

Clint is watching him with those flat bird eyes, expressionless, intent.

"The knife, it was sharp, but it's delicate work, and I had to hold so still. They were there, though, and they just crowded close. Inside." Tony points to his heart, his head, "it hurt, when she cut. But outside, here," he touches his own neck. "It felt so good."

Clint's still not moving.

"I didn't want them to stop," he whispers. "I wanted her to just keep going. Cut forever, until all of me spilled out on the floor."

Clint shuts his eyes.

"I sort of lose track for a bit," Tony says. He picks up his tumbler, drinks even though some of it spills. "The next flash is the blood. There was a lot of it, and it smelled good. Not like before, but like *home*, you know?"

Clint shakes his head. Stops. Shrugs. "His smelled like home. After."

"Yeah." Tony knocks back some more. "Bet you could tell what blood was his when you walked in a room."

"A lot further away than that."

Tony thinks of bloodied cards. Wonders. Shoves that aside. "So. I know that she, that they, took me someplace, someplace safe, after the cuts. They didn't just remove the old bond, they replaced it."

Clint's looking at him again. It's flat, intent. "Are you sure?"

"Oh yeah." Tony picks up Clint's glass of cognac and knocks the whole thing back. "If anyone ever asks, I will fucking lie to my grave. I mean it."

"I know. Is that why you can't--with Rogers? You're still linked to them?"

Tony shakes his head. "No. That was, I think that went with the baby. The abortion, it didn't go so good. I was, you know, pretty damaged. Inside. Not everything the fuckers used was, you know, they--used things. On me."

"I know," Clint says softly. "I read the reports."

"Right." What had Tony been going to say? Oh yes. "The broken bond, getting over it, the main thing I remember, it's sleeping when I was held. Warm. Sweet. Real. Down underground, not earth, but *rock*. The weight of them, it held me here. There was a mark, right here, on my hip." Tony touches it, familiar. "That's from someone knocking into me because they tripped in the dark and held onto me, laughing."

"This wasn't sexual," Clint says, "this was family. Wasn't it?"

Tony's hand is shaking as he picks up the lighter, the metal cool against his palm, turns it over and over. "Yeah."

Clint's quiet, just watching.

It gives Tony the courage to say, "Their blood, dried on my own skin, being down there, everything warm, under the rock, away from the noise of that old bond in my head? That's why I'm here. Alive. Because of them."

Clint reaches out his killer's hand and he curls it over the tracery of fine scars on Tony's neck, just holds it there while Tony's pulse flutters against his fingers. "Family."

"Family," Tony says, voice rough. He grips Clint's wrist, holds on hard enough to bruise.

Clint shuts his eyes, and the tips of his lashes are wet. "Let me tell you about the time I met Coulson."

Chapter 37

Steve gets the text message as soon as he's back to base after the exercise. Steve reads it, then he reads it again. His jaw clenches, then he tells the field teams that they'll have to debrief later. He's running for the jet before the head agent can even stammer out a question.

"Jarvis caught Barton playing with a crossbow to the throat. Come home. ~AES."

When Steve steps into the house, he's already gotten an update from Jarvis. Tony's been playing cards with Clint, and Jarvis thinks things are, perhaps, better. However, Jarvis recommends Steve check on them in person.

He doesn't say why.

The elevator opens onto the living room floor, and Steve's dragged back in time. The room is hazy with cigarette smoke--not Tony's expensive cigars, not just the occasional Saturday morning cigarette--but the swirl of gray-brown hanging over a table while a lamp shines down. Cigarettes lit one after another, the whole room dim in the thickness of it.

The sharp note of expensive liquor, pain, tears.

The unmistakable iron tang of blood.

Steve moves through the shadows, and Jarvis obliges him by not changing the lights or making a single sound. The two at the table are too drunk to notice the soft noise of the elevator opening, especially under the music that's still playing. It's something Steve's heard before, that Tony plays on poker nights sometimes.

The poker table is a mess. Spilled drink. An empty bottle and another part-way gone. Cards shoved aside, some of them warped and damp. Empty and half-full crystal tumblers. A plate covered with butts. A couple of arrows. Three partly-made cell phones.

To one side, not quite in the glow of lamplight is Clint's utility knife, tipped dark.

"So then he says," Clint's saying, "if *you* can't get a shot, I'll shoot him myself."

Steve hears Tony's laugh, but it's different. Sure, he's drunk, but the note under it is both sad and warm.

Still in the shadows, Steve steps closer so he can see both of them. Clint's propped his chin on one forearm, nearly face down on the table, but still able to see Tony. In Clint's left hand, he's got both a cigarette and a tumbler full of what smells like Tony's best small batch bourbon.

There are tear tracks on Clint's face, and he's swaying just a little, side to side, like whatever he's feeling is so deep he's not able to hold it inside.

Tony looks drunker than Steve has ever seen him. Not the posh tipsy that Tony gets at parties, not even the harder drunk that Tony gets on certain days, when he won't talk to people at all, but works endlessly. This is different. Steve's not sure how Tony's even still upright--sure, he's an experienced drinker, but he's small, and he's lost weight, and they've been at this for hours.

But Tony's sprawled in his chair, eyes dancing, voice slowed rather than slurred. "He threatened to tazer me until I drooled once."

"Man, you just charm allllll the boys," Clint says.

"It's my sunny disposition," Tony says, gesturing with his half-full glass. Nothing spills, which is remarkable, since it sloshes up near the rim. "You know, I wish--"

Clint shifts his chin on his forearm and considers Tony sleepily. "You wish what, buddy?"

"Wish to hell I'd known he fanboyed our Steve. I had an early shield, you know, and he saw it, *handed* it to me, and you know how I am about that."

"Aw, man," Clint says. His eyes close and Steve sees the tears trickle down his cheeks again.

"See?" Tony pours more liquor into Clint's glass. "Talk about I wish."

To Steve's surprise, Clint sits up, hoists the glass. Tony hoists his, too. Tapping the crystal together, they both say, "To family," and knock the bourbon back until it's gone.

Steve's not sure what all has gone on, but he thinks maybe Tony is helping Clint wake his bonded. Steve didn't know Coulson well, but he knows that Tony's haunted by his loss, that Clint lives with pain that Steve can barely imagine. He shouldn't intrude, but he's stepping slowly into the circle of light anyway, as Tony refills both glasses.

"Evening," Steve says.

Clint blinks up at him, slowly, in the way of the deeply drunk.

Tony leans over until he's resting against Steve's side, cheek against Steve's hip. "Why you always gotta wear khaki?"

Clint laughs helplessly, waves his glass.

"Deal me in?" Steve asks, stroking Tony's hair. It's a joke, because they're not playing cards, but he thinks Tony will get it.

Tony brushes his cheek against Steve's hip like a cat, pleased to be petted. "'kay." He doesn't move away.

Steve's gaze strays over the table. The mess. The damp cards. The spilled booze. The knife, tipped in their blood. Some of that blood is Tony's. Steve knows it in his bones, could smell it as soon as he walked in the house. But it's sweet on the tongue, and instead of asking about

it, Steve just runs his hand through Tony's hair some more. "You know what, I think it's time for bed."

Tony's eyes are closed, and his breathing has gone even, mouth slightly open.

"Definitely bed," Steve says, fond. "I'll just--"

Then he sees Clint is asleep, too, faint snores coming from him even though he's still holding his glass upright, half-full of booze.

Steve sighs softly, shakes his head. "Jarvis?"

"Certainly, Captain." The lights raise enough for Steve to see.

Steve tucks them each into their beds, makes sure there's water on their nightstands, removes boots, checks pockets for pointed weaponry (Clint) and pointed tools (Tony), and pulls the covers up, before slipping back downstairs to clean up.

"Jarvis," Steve says. "Do you know who ordered Agent Romanoff to Pakistan?"

"Sir has set my protocols to not reveal undue amounts of personal information, except in cases of grave importance or personal safety."

Yes, that's a careful answer, worthy of Tony. Steve puts away the bottles, washes the glasses. His hand hovers over the knife. Steve gives in, picks it up, twirls it under the soft lamp, considering the tip.

It's Clint's utility knife. Steve's men all carried them, both on missions and in battle. Steve killed people with his, and he's sure that Clint has, too.

"We had a small mission last week," Steve says softly, turning the blade to catch the light. "There was some intel critical to international security, and I was privileged to overhear a discussion on modern torture methods between Agent Romanoff and your Sir."

"Indeed, Captain?"

"Yes. Natasha said that one of the first steps is social isolation. You remove a person's most important social bonds, then you expose them to pressure. The person being tortured will then begin forming artificially strong bonds with whoever is left."

"I believe that is an accurate summary of some modern methods, Captain."

"Do you know what Tony said?"

"No, Captain."

"He said that sometimes the torturer gets their desired bond, but sometimes instead, the person cleaves more strongly to the ghost who was left behind or taken away. Sometimes the person cleaves so strongly to the ghost that they shatter entirely." Steve tilts the blade one

last time, sets it back down on the table. "Can you arrange an appointment with whoever sent Agent Romanoff to Pakistan?"

"Yes, Captain," Jarvis says, voice pitched low, just for Steve's ears. "I will clear your calendar for first thing tomorrow morning. I will also recall the Agent from her overseas assignment."

"Thanks, Jarvis."

"You are most welcome."

*

Tony crawls out of bed at 2 in the afternoon, considers the matter, drinks some water, and goes back to bed.

By 6, he's willing to try again. This time, he showers first, then carefully (very carefully) creeps downstairs to the kitchen.

Toast is out of the question, but maybe he could try one of Steve's crackers.

Or not.

Not works, too.

"Stark," Natasha says.

Tony levitates, then clutches his head, then leans against the wall and moans.

"Oh dear." Her voice is quieter, but she's moving around the kitchen in a brisk fashion.

Tony decides that if she wants to kill him, she may as well have a stationary target.

"Drink this." She holds out a small glass full of something.

Tony stares blearily at it. "Will it kill me?"

"Do you care right now?"

Tony drinks it, shudders. His stomach thinks about turning inside out, but subsides after only a brief threat of revolution. When he opens his eyes again, Natasha is still there, holding out an ice pack and a sympathetic expression.

He takes the ice pack, but he doesn't understand the expression.

"Thank you, katyonak."

Tony holds the ice pack to his aching temples. The splitting skull feeling is starting to subside. God only knows what he just knocked back. Probably something Russian. Or a rare deadly poison. "I think I'm the one who should be saying that."

"No." She looks at him for another long moment, then she disappears.

"Huh," Tony says. He staggers to the couch and watches cartoons.

A couple hours later, Steve appears. "Oh, Roadrunner!"

Tony pats the spot next to him on the couch. Steve immediately sits down, props his feet on the coffee table, and watches with him. Steve carries in the smell of a summer breeze--not his alpha scent, but an actual summer breeze. Since it's cold and pissing down rain in New York, Tony leans close and sniffs him audibly. "Where you been and how come I didn't get to come?"

"Somewhere down South," Steve says absently. "How's the head?"

"I'll live."

"Good. Thanks for yesterday."

Tony watches Wile E. blow shit up again. "All this thanks is making me nervous."

"You'll live," Steve says cheerfully.

*

Tony's not sure what Steve did, but Natasha actively lives at Stark House now. She's lived here since the battle, of course, on paper, but she didn't spend much time here.

Now she's here often enough that Tony knows how she likes her Sunday morning eggs (scrambled wet, with dry toasted black bread).

It's good.

Clint's a little better, Tony thinks. Looks a little less like he'll shatter into a million pieces.

When Clint shows up with his left wrist in a wide white bandage, Tony doesn't say a word.

Steve does. "Agent, what happened? What kind of training exercises are they doing while you're up there?"

Clint pours cereal into a bowl (Lucky Charms today). "Had the day off, actually."

Steve's frown is the worried puppy look, and no one in the house is immune--not even Natasha. Clint sets the milk down with a sigh. He takes off his wrist guards and then unpeels the white bandage.

Tony's not at all surprised at what he sees.

An exact duplicate of the bruises Tony's hand left that night, tattooed into Clint's wrist in patterns of scrolled black barbed wire, tribal, delicate, fierce.

Clint's skin is shiny with vaseline, the lines still freshly black, still blooming faintly with blood, a forever handprint.

Steve examines Clint's wrist carefully. Then he nods and wraps Clint's wrist back up. To Tony's surprise, Steve drops a kiss on Clint's forehead, then hands him the milk. Not another word is said.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

I am actually of two minds about posting this chapter. It's an explicit description of how Tony chooses to deal with a surprise heat. It's all consensual, but it involves two (male) prostitutes and some fairly dark kink (by request); I personally find it a mix of steamy and depressing, but YMMV. If you would like to know what happens before you read it, or if you would like to skip this chapter, I have posted a brief description using Rot13 code. Just paste the below into www.rot13.com

Gbal qvfpbiref gung uvf urng vf pbzvat hc fhqqrayl naq bss fpurqhyr. Ur pnyyf Crccre, fb fur pna pnapry uvf obneq zrrgvatf. Crccre vf qvfnccbvagrq, orpnhfr Gbal ershfrf gb gryy nalbar gung ur'f vyy, vg'f trggvat jbefr, naq vg xrrcf unccravat. Crccre bssref gb pbzr hc jvgu n cynhfvoyr (aba-bzrtn) vyyarff gb gryy gur FV obneq, ohg Gbal ershfrf. Fur nfxf uvz gb ng yrnfg tvir uvf Qe'f nqivpr n gel (juvpu Gbal unf fb sne ershfrq gb qb).

Gbal tbrf gb uvf Prageny Cnex cragubhfr fb ur jba'g or arne Fgrir. Ur neenatrf sbe gur cerfpevcgvbaf, uvf hfhny nycun cebfgvghgr (anzrq Nhqra) cyhf nabgure. Gbal tvirf Nhqra n xvax yvfg bs jung ur'q yvxr qbar guvf gvzr. Nhqra nterrf, ohg eryhpgnagyl, fvapr cerivbhf nggrzcgf gb hfr zrqvpngvba va gur cnfg unir tbar jrveq. Gur zrqvpngvba vf nqzvavfgrerq ivn frireny yhor fhccbfvgbevrf. Gurl unir frk zhygvcyr gvzrf, naq, nppbeqvat gb Gbal'f rkcyvpvg vafgehpgvbaf, Nhqra gbcf uvz naq vafvfgf gung Gbal qb/fnluhzvyvngvat guvatf, gur jnl gung ur unq orra pbaqvgvbarq gb qhevat uvf svefg zneevntr (jvgu Sebzz). Gbal pyrneyl svaqf guvf obgu nebhfvat naq ubeevoyr; vg'f zber n srgvfu guna n xvax sbe uvz.

Gur guveq fprar erirnyf gung gur erfg bs gur urng tbrf jbefr naq jbefr sbe uvz. Ur'f zber naq zber qrfcrengr sbe gbhpu, ybfrf jbeqf, rgp. Nhqra qbrf uvf orfg gb uryc, ohg vg'f pyrne gung gur zrqvpngvba znqr Gbal jbefr engure guna orggre. Jura Gbal pbzrf bhg bs vg, ur'f irel qrcerffrq. Nhqra gnyxf gb uvz nobhg vg, gryyf Gbal gung ur pnyyrq bhg Fgrir'f anzr. Nhqra fhttrfgf Gbal tvir Fgrir n gel, ohg Gbal vf pregnva gung Fgrir jbhyq or ubeevsvrq ol Gbal qhevat urng. Nhqra qvfnterrf; ur guvaxf Gbal unf abguvat gb or nfunzrq bs.

Remember: there WILL BE happy endings, I swear! *peace out*

Tony stares down at the small metal test device proudly stamped with the Stark Industries logo. He gives his hand a good shake, because the pin-prick really does hurt. After a moment, the baby LED screen flashes bright neurotic pink.

Approximately Time to Next Heat: 27 hours

God fucking dammit.

Tony hates his life.

*

Tony's first call is to Pepper.

Her bright smile flashes on the video screen. "Tony! How's the prototype for the phone coming?" Her smile falters and fades to a frown. "Tony?"

He grimaces, holds up the test device.

Pepper's shoulders slump. "Tony. Please tell me you've been taking your medications."

"Hey!" Tony sets down the device and crosses his arms. "I've been good. You have no idea."

"Tony," her voice is fond, but exasperated. "We've talked about this."

"I've taken my pills! I've got Jarvis tracking my sleep! I'm being good!"

Pepper looks over her shoulder, turns back. "OK, Tony. I just worry. Look, I want you to think about trying Dr Osborne's suggestion."

Tony rolls his eyes and hunches his shoulders.

"Tony."

"I know, but I just--it's not that simple, Pepper."

"You have three board meetings this week. Tomorrow, Wednesday, and Thursday. Are you going to be able to make any of them?" Her voice isn't accusing, just--

Tony looks down. She's disappointed. Pepper has always been understanding about his body's quirks. After the palladium poisoning though, she's angrier. He doesn't think she blames him for being sick, not really, but she does blame him for being unwilling to tell anyone. This is the same thing. Tony won't tell the board or any of the senior management that he's sick. Pepper keeps telling him that she can make up something plausible that has nothing to do with his actual state. But goddamit, Tony doesn't want those fuckers to know anything.

His silence is enough.

"I'll come up with something," she says at last.

"You always do." He tries a smile. "Thanks."

"Tony, I shouldn't have to. I wish you'd just get someone to look at--" Pepper turns again. "I have to go, especially if I need to deal with the board. Again."

"Yeah," he says, smile forced. "Yeah, of course. Thanks, Pep."

"Feel better, Tony."

*

Tony's second call is to Dark Affections. He books Auden plus one extra, gives them the Central Park address for the rendezvous. Tony's had Auden at Stark House in one of the guest floors before, but Tony's not completely lost his mind. He's leaving the property right now and not returning until the recommended two days post-heat are up. Steve has remarkable control, but he also has improved senses.

No way is Tony spending his heat with someone else in Steve's own home.

*

His third call is to the detested Dr Osborne. Pepper's right. She always is. He has to at least try this.

*

Tony spends his last 27 hours of freedom (well, 25 now) playing with schematics and sleeping in the penthouse's master bedroom and feeling like shit.

*

Auden arrives exactly on time. He's tall, with long silky black hair and an elegant build. His friend, Rowan, is an extreme alpha, just like Auden. Tony should probably pay attention to what the man looks like, but he's too busy inhaling deeply.

Neither man smells right, but they do smell good.

Tony's in the grip of a vicious headache and chills so bad he's soaked in sweat. He ripped his clothes off hours ago, and he's been huddling under blankets and then throwing them back off again for a while.

Auden asks Jarvis to lock the house down, and then he turns to Tony. "You look terrible, babe."

Tony shivers and glares at him. "Fuck you, too."

"Kink list?" Auden asks. "Or just the usual?"

"Side table," Tony says, shivering some more.

Rowan sets down a large bag from a local pharmacy and looks around. Auden absently points out the bathroom, kitchen, toy chest. Rowan inspects some things, then he takes his turn reading the list.

"Are you sure about this?" Auden asks Tony, holding up the list. "We can do that, no problem, but--"

"Oh shut up and fuck me."

*

The first couple rounds go exactly as usual, except with a bit more oomph. Instead of being tied, Rowan holds Tony's hands down as Auden fucks him. When Auden's done, Rowan has a go.

After a little while, the edge is off, and the pros are sitting on the floor playing video games while Tony's sprawled naked across their laps. From time to time, one of their characters will die. Then Rowan will pet his hair, fuck his mouth with his thumb, tug on the collar they've clipped around his neck. Auden, on the other hand, likes to spread Tony's legs wide and fuck him absently with a few fingers until Tony's gasping and writhing. Then he'll stop, hold his fingers in front of Tony's mouth to be cleaned, and go back to playing the video game.

Eventually, Auden tosses away his controller. "He's under enough. Get the supplies."

Tony's still aware enough to dread this. When he starts to sit up, Auden grabs his collar. "Hush."

That makes it easier. Rowan's back in not too much longer. Tony hears the rustle of the bag, the supplies, the quiet sounds of unwrapped plastic.

"Play with his mouth while I do this. He likes that. Or pet his hair."

Tony feels Rowan's hands in his hair, stroking his face, finger fucking his mouth while Tony sucks at them. Tony's shivering again, because he hates this part. Hates it.

"OK, babe. Ass up."

Tony obeys. It is easier after being fucked a few times, but it's never going to be easy. Tony buries his face in Rowan's lap and hopes he'll be allowed to get away with that. His wrists are stretched in front of him and his ass is in the air, legs spread.

"Good boy."

Then Tony feels it, the long slow slide of the rubber tip going inside him all the way. Auden strokes his thigh, praise that only feels real when he's like this. After a second, he can feel the sticky warmth of the lube sliding in. Tony squeezes his eyes shut tight. Christ, it's humiliating, and god, he hates that the humiliation itself makes it better. Makes it feel good.

"That's it. You're good, so good, come on, take it for me. There." Auden pats his ass like he's done well, absent, fond. The pat you give a dog. Tony buries his face against Rowan's knee. The hands in his hair hold him still now, and that helps, too.

"Rowan's never seen this, so he's going to have a treat." Tony can feel when Auden adjusts something. Probably adding the next tube of lube.

"How many did he fucking prescribe?" Tony demands. God, he's feeling strange already, and his voice sounds hoarse.

"Do you really want to know?" Auden's finger rubs a lazy circle around Tony's opening until he moans. "I've got two more, how about that, and then I'm going to just slide this plug in and we're going to play with you until you're really hot for it."

"Jesus Christ."

"I think that means we'll get a good tip."

Tony's only let Auden use the prescription-strength alphaze lube a couple times before, and always at far less than the damn doctor thinks is advisable. This time, Tony wrote Auden a letter asking him to use exactly as much as prescribed, no matter what, and to do a few other things the doctor suggested. In for a penny.

The pheromones are supposed to help make the heat both deeper and more 'hormonally appropriate', but as far as Tony's concerned what they really do is make him desperate to be fucked as hard as possible. It's like the damn stuff flips more switches than Steve in nothing but a towel, damp from the communal shower on the Hellicarrier, and oh god, what an image.

"That's it, good boy." Auden's voice interrupts Tony's wandering thoughts, which is probably for the best. "Ro, want to have a go? Let's make him take all of it. I love watching how much he hates it. We'll make him squirm."

And fuck, that's all it takes. Tony's head is hanging down and he's shoving backwards, desperate, needy.

"The hell is that?" Rowan asks.

"Hard core humiliation kink. I'll show you." Auden's voice shifts to a deep, rough register. "Good boy, Tony. Now stop moving. Very good. I'm putting this plug in you, and you're not to take it out. You tighten down on it and hold it inside. Do you understand? I want Rowan to see exactly how hot you can get. He's had a rough week, and I expect you to be very good for him."

Tony obeys without any further thought, heavily under now. They pet him, they hold him in their laps while they have lunch, they splay him on the bed and take turns kissing marks into his skin, and all the while the lube is working deeper in him, full of the damn pheromones and turning him higher and higher. Finally, all he can do is shiver and moan. Tony's eyes are closed and his brain is offline, all the crises of engineering flown, all the math silenced, nothing but instinct left. Instinct and the craving for touch.

They move him around like a doll, and he lets them, and when Auden shoves his ass in the air and pulls out the plug to put in another dose of lube, Tony is nearly sobbing. "You're going to have to hold him down, Ro. He doesn't like this one at all. No, we have to, I promised him. OK, Tony, babe, you're really under, Ro's got you, you can struggle all you want, OK?"

Tony whimpers and tugs hard, but Auden's right. Ro has him. Pulling hard and thrashing helps some, because the last dose hurts. It's like having molten lava poured inside, and he's crying when it's done.

Then Auden's dragging him up, telling him to open his eyes, see how he looks.

Tony has to obey, right now.

Auden's sitting on the edge of the bed in front of the huge gold-edged mirror. Tony's in his lap, back to Auden's chest, legs held open. His face is tear streaked, and his cock is fully hard, and the insides of his thighs are smeared with slick.

With his head tipped back and his mouth wet, he looks debauched, but not as debauched as he's going to be.

His wrists are red from struggling so much, but Auden isn't after that, or the wide brown collar Tony hates wearing but can't seem to stop asking him to use.

"Watch," Auden says. He's still fully clothed, but his jeans are unzipped. He scoots Tony down a bit so he can free his cock. It's large, as large as Tony suspects Steve's to be, and there's a knot forming at the base, just a little. Tony whines when he sees it, because he knows what it means.

Wants it.

And Auden knows him. All his kinks. Tony shuts his eyes and turns his head away.

"No," Auden says sharply. "You have to look. Watch yourself. Watch."

Auden's strong, and it's easy for him to lift Tony up by the hips until the base of the plug is poised over his cock.

"Are you going to be good?" Auden asks him. "Are you going to show off nice for my friend?"

Tony shivers, looking at himself in the mirror. The plug Auden inserted in him is easy to see. A rich dark red, easy to pull out again. "I'll be good," he whispers. He doesn't want to be, he hates himself, but he knows he will be. Whatever Auden wants, he'll do.

"Good boy." Auden looks up, meets Rowan's eyes in the mirror. "Take it out."

Rowan slides his hand down Tony's body like he has every right to do anything he wants to him. Tweaking his nipples for a while as Tony shivers desperately. The lube makes them ulta-sensitive, and sometimes that's all Auden will do, lick and play with them until Tony can't take it. But Rowan moves on.

There's no warning, just a sharp pop, and then the plug is gone. The pheromone lube is thinned from the heat of Tony's body and mixed with Tony's own slick. It trickles out wetly, and with it is the rich heady scent of the come from the first few fucks.

Tony watches himself drip slick all over Auden's cock, where it trails down, so much it's on Auden's jeans, the chair, his legs, and god it's so humiliating and so good. He's making noises, beyond words.

"So desperate, aren't you?" Auden whispers. "What are you, sweetheart?"

"Ready," Tony says. "Fuck me. Please."

"You have to say it." Auden's voice is gentle, and in the mirror, his eyes are kind. "You know this, baby. We've tried without it. You have to say it, if you're going to be good today, if this is gonna work."

"Don't want to."

"You never do." Auden looks up in the mirror, meets Ro's eyes. "If he doesn't say it in another minute, we'll try another dose and wait."

"Fucking bastard," Tony says.

"Just following the boss's orders," Auden says, nipping his ear.

Tony shuts his eyes, thinks of Steve, squirms for another second. "Fucking bite my neck."

Auden pauses. "That's on your forbidden list."

"I don't care." Tony's desperate and he wants it, wants Steve's mouth, needs it. Christ, he is so ready.

"No, it's--"

Oh god, Tony knows it's unfair. Auden's doing his goddamn job, what Tony's paying him to do, and it's all so fucking unfair. He's disappointed Pep again, and he can't work when he keeps falling into this shit, and he's tired of being sick, and what the hell it's only biology anyway, and Auden's right besides. Saying it *is* the only way Tony can come when he's like this. Fucking hate them all, he thinks, fucking hate them.

"I'll say it," he mutters. "I'll say it. I'll be good."

"Good job, babe, go on." Auden repositions him so his cock is just nudging inside. "And when you slide down on my cock, you're going to be so wet. I'm going to love riding you. And when I've knotted you good and hard, and you're all wet again, I'm going to hand you over to my friend so he can have a turn, and you'll be so full you won't know your own name. What do you think?"

Tony can't think, except that it sounds so fucking good.

"Now, say it, before I have to get rough," Auden says, voice suddenly harsh. "What are you?"

Tony grits his teeth. Finds he can't unclamp them. Rowan's hand is in his hair, yanking his head back, makes it easier. "I'm a bitch, OK, I'm a bitch in heat and if you don't fuck me, I am seriously going to die. I need it. I want your cock in me more than I want anything. It's all I am. Just something for you to fuck. *Please.*"

"Good boy." Auden moves Tony and then thank god, he's being filled all the way down, and Tony can feel the knot suddenly swell, and it makes the familiar panic spike deep inside.

"Watch," Auden says sharply. "Come on, pretty little bitch, watch yourself. Then you can come. That's it."

Tony's yanked out of his panic, watches Auden's cock disappear inside, and the gush of warm wet liquid that leaves him. The humiliation spikes, but so does the pleasure.

Rowan leans down, mouth on his nipples. Rowan sucks hard and Auden shifts, settles in a slow rhythm, fucking up into him so hits that spot just right, deep inside. The whole time, Auden croons the words into his ear, how pretty he is like this, how good, how lovely it is when he's a bitch in heat, how much it's a joy to just use him, how good it feels to make him take it, how such a pretty bitch should be in heat all the time, ready for use, whenever he wants, and Tony hates Fromm to the depths of his soul, but when he comes, it's dark and hot, solid.

Auden knots him for a long time, and then, when they're both curled up and warm, Auden softens and slips out.

Rowan takes a turn, and he puts Tony on all fours, comfortable and familiar. Tony takes it, and it's easier this time, because his hands are held down by Auden, who keeps up the soft praise and sharp bites of command. Tony struggles and pulls away and Auden hurts him, just enough, as Ro fucks him until Tony comes again, saying the words he hates, that make him hate himself, but that he needs.

*

It lasts for two and a half days, and when it's over, Tony sits on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

Rowan's already gone.

Auden comes in, sits next to him. Tony scrubs at his face. Right. He pulls the fat wad of bills out of his back pocket. "Sorry. Here."

"You paid already."

"Tip."

"Uh huh." But Auden makes the money disappear. His arm around Tony's shoulder is comforting, gentle. "I'm not sure the full dose was a good idea."

"Yeah, no kidding." By yesterday, Tony's brain had been offline. Any moment he wasn't being fucked or touched, his skin felt raw and hot and so painful the movement of air was

like agony. The stomach cramps were even worse.

Tony'd lost words completely. He can remember sobbing, needy noises, unable to do anything but get closer. At one point, Auden had knotted him, then held him close, rocking him like a child while Tony shook apart.

After, he remembers a soft voiced conversation between Ro and Auden, Jarvis saying something, Ro coming back, Auden swallowing something with a glass of water, Ro saying something else, leaving for another while.

Tony'd been too far gone to put any of that together at the time, but in the gray light of morning he gets it. Auden, who's taken him through more heats than anyone.

Auden had talked to Jarvis, and Jarvis had agreed, and they had drugs delivered so that Auden could get it up and keep it up and make sure Tony didn't lose his mind. Auden had fucked Tony himself, had asked Ro to come on Tony's neck, hold him down, say whatever it took to keep Tony under.

God damn, but Tony hates this. Hates Dr Osborne. Hates his body. Hates his life. Hates himself.

"Babe, I do have one question."

Tony has his head in his hands again. He braces himself, because he has limited memory of what he gets up to like this, and the possibilities are endless and horrifying. "Sure."

"Who's Steven?"

Tony takes away his hands, thoroughly appalled. "Oh Christ, I didn't."

"You did." Auden laughs softly. "Don't worry about it. I got no illusions that I get to keep you. But who is he?"

Tony buries his face in his hands again. "No one."

"No one? Because pretty sure you made him sound like god."

"Do not even do an impression," Tony hisses. "Just don't."

"I couldn't make my voice sexy enough anyway. But he's got to be one lucky guy."

"Don't think he'd see it that way."

"Uh huh." Auden kisses his temple. "Speaking as one pro to another, next time, just book him."

Tony laughs sharply. "He would never. Seriously."

"Seriously?" Auden gets up, ruffles Tony's hair. Leans down and whispers, "You are a beautiful bitch when you're in heat, babe, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. He'll want you.

Believe it."

If only it was that simple. Tony watches Auden go.

Right.

Time to take the longest shower in the world and call Pepper.

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

> In the soundtrack of this story, one song is Nancy Griffith's Across the Great Divide, which you can listen to here. I have stood there, one foot planted on the left, one foot planted on the right, and I have watched the water run different directions, mountain rock beneath me. It's beautiful.
>
> But the song is not about geography.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve isn't sure how it happened, but sometimes he is happy.

The first time it happened, Steve dropped his glass of juice where it shattered all over Tony's clean kitchen floor.

When he tells Dr Katz about it, she nods. "Maybe it'll happen again."

"I guess Tony can always buy more glasses."

"I meant happiness," she says, in her blunt New York way.

Maybe.

To Steve's surprise, it does.

*

Living in Stark House can be an adventure, but Steve likes it. Natasha is here more often, and she's so neutral that Steve finds her calming. Having a second alpha in their pack is good. Steve tries hard not to think of it as 'our pack', but he slips, sometimes.

Clint's doing a lot better. Steve knew some bonded betas back in the day. Much more common among the civilians back home than the military men. It was a hard choice, of course, because of the risk.

Despite all their tests, SHIELD doesn't know what Loki did that broke the bond between Clint and Coulson, but, although Steve would never say this, he's glad it happened. Glad that Clint wasn't lost along with Coulson.

Tony's opinion of SHIELD seems to reach new lows each time he shows up on the Hellicarrier for meetings. Today, when Clint walked off to another set of tests, Tony'd shouted, "Tell them it was a fucking glowing green magic dildo that did it!"

Clint raised the hand shadowed with tattoos, but didn't turn.

Steve thought Clint's shoulders looked lighter, though. Tony has a point. SHIELD needs to let this go. Yes, it would be important to understand the mechanism if it could be replicated, but months have passed and SHIELD's guesses do boil down to 'magic'.

The team meeting itself was boring. Steve paid attention because it's his job, but Tony fiddled with his phone the whole time.

When Fury asked, "Stark, would you like to share with the class?" Tony only said, "Thanks, but I don't share well with others."

Steve bit back a smile, because he's the team leader. He's supposed to keep people in line. When Fury turned his glare on Steve, Steve just kept his face schooled in his usual expression of intent interest, as perfect for military meetings as glittery parties. There's a new little tic at the side of Fury's jaw, but Steve will admit nothing. Including how funny it is that Tony can wind Fury up.

*

There's *nothing* funny about Fury's latest report.

Steve drops the gray file folder that he saw on Agent Ryers's desk. The papers, the photos, the report scatter across the glass table like playing cards.

"Where is he?" Steve asks Ryers.

The agent is stammering, backing up, holding up both hands.

"Where is he?" Steve repeats. "Where is Fury?"

All around them, people fall silent. Techs in dark uniforms stop working at their desks. Agents in suits stand still.

Steve looks at them all, breathing heavily. He stands up slowly. Like a pebble dropped into a pond, their gazes fall, their postures go soft, most back up, hands raise to show they're empty, jaws expose throats. Still, no one says a word.

Fine.

Steve slams his chair back under the table so hard he can hear the crack of the glass.

Behind him, the room is silent, everyone still.

*

It doesn't take him long to track Fury. Steve doesn't pick up speed until he's nearly there. He isn't going to spook his prey--not on this hunt.

Fury knows he's coming, and he's staged it as pretty as any portrait.

Standing in front of a set of huge windows, back to the sky, silhouetted against clear sunlight. Black coat, dark eye, feet braced.

There's less than a hundred yards left, when Steve hears it. Muttered curses, the soft thud of workboots on riveted steel plating. Steve notes the noise, inhales deeply, then ignores it. He will not be stayed from his path.

All the blood, all the fire, all the risk. For what? To be pawns in a game of chess. Steve thinks of a bloody knife on a card table, the reek of stale cigarettes in the dark, expensive whiskey, a crossbow.

The snarl is tearing through his throat as he reaches Fury.

Steve's sight is going red, tunneling down, fierce and sharp as any other mission target, but Fury doesn't flinch.

"Captain," Fury says.

"He's *alive*."

"You're going to want to take a good few steps back, Captain, and let me explain."

Steve's fist comes up, arm pulling back, when he feels it, work-rough hands grabbing him. The words he's been ignoring because he's so focused on the fight. "Come on, no, we'll fix it, goddammit, can't leave you alone with these bastards for five fucking minutes, Steve, listen to me, will you just--"

It's like hearing a fly, far off, being attacked by a kitten.

Fury's saying something else, sharp, but Steve ignores the words, focusing on Fury's face.

"I thought you wanted us off the leash," Steve says, voice tight. "I thought we needed a *push*. Congratulations, Colonel--"

The words, the touch, the light hands are on his arm again and Steve gives it a shake, not hard, just enough to loosen the grip. He'll listen, he will, in just a moment, but he has to deal with this first, and--

There's a scrape of boot against metal, a thud, a sharp pain noise.

Steve whips around, crouches down.

Tony's sprawled on the floor, grimacing.

"Are you all right?" Steve asks. "Where are you hurt?"

"Tripped," Tony mutters, but his eyes are tight. "What is going on?"

There's a slight rustle of leather, and Tony says sharply, "Fucking shut up, you. Was I talking to you? No. So shut up."

"Where are you hurt?" Steve says.

"I'm not hurt. *Tell me*."

"Coulson's alive."

Tony's face loses its blood, going gray and ashen. "Get Barton. Someone get Barton. Do it now."

"On it." Natasha's voice, from somewhere, calm and hard.

"Pump him full of as many narcotics as you have on hand," Tony says, still staring at Steve. "And get fucking Darth Vader out of here before I--look, someone just take that fucker and go." He stops, jaw tightening, oil stained fingers clenching into fists.

"On it, katyonak. Director, this way."

Steve doesn't even turn to watch Fury leave. He looks at Tony, inhales deeply. "You tripped on purpose."

"You'd have hated the brig."

*

It takes a while to sort things out.

Tony takes charge of things in a very Tony way, ordering medications, bespoke suits, medical transport, furniture, artwork, highly classified multi-media files, takeout Chinese, Bavarian crème donuts, and a bewildering number of what Steve would swear are complicated foreign pastries.

"No, no, the turo torta. Not kiwi for godssakes, what are you thinking? Yes, I suppose strawberries if you must." Tony is talking a mile a minute at his phone while tapping at its clear surface.

They're in a small room in a medical bay. Various high-level SHIELD agents keep coming in and out, offering Tony paperwork or tech, which he curls his lip at or signs, depending.

Steve leans against the wall, watching the show.

"And what about marzipan and hazelnut? Yes, yes, good idea. Do it my dear mother's way. Just send a couple of everything. Thank you. What? Of course I wasn't kidding. But not a couple. Three. No, make it four." Tony makes kissy noises at the phone, taps some more. "Perfect. We'll see you then."

Another uniformed agent enters. This one looks stern, uncompromising. He's a beta and he has a formal higher-up air to him. "Na Stark, I'm afraid we won't be able to fulfill your request."

Tony slides his thumb against the glass and his phone goes black, all the milky lettering and pictures dark. "I don't believe I made any *requests*."

Steve straightens up, uncrosses his arms.

"We're not going to be able to supply you with medical-grade narcotics," the agent says. "It's just out of the question."

Tony stares at him, blinks. Steve recognizes that look now. It's the one Tony wears when he's been pulled back to the unfortunate reality of dealing with people who can't keep up with his mind. "Agent Barton requires narcotics. You have them. Hand them over."

"We have already administered a safe dose of pain medication to the agent at your request, Na Stark."

"The agent," Tony says. "God, what is wrong with you people?"

"Na Stark, I really do not know what you--"

"You can't even say his name. It's like he's a walking medical test to you. He might as well be a potted plant."

The agent stiffens, but Steve wonders whether the man hasn't been part of the testing crew. "That is an unfair --" the agent says.

"Oh, it's plenty fair. Where the fuck were you when he was screaming until his throat was raw? Oh I'm sorry--you were on the other side of the mirrored glass." Tony steps in close, lowers his voice to a silky purr. "Get me a bottle of oxy 40 mgs and one of hydrocodone 10s. 60 each. Do it *now*."

"Out of the question." The agent is looking at Tony with narrowed eyes. "I'm well aware of your reputation, Na Stark, and it would be unethical of me--"

Tony laughs in disbelief. He turns to Steve. "Can you believe these assholes?"

Steve pushes himself off the wall. He hadn't heard about the two-way glass, but it makes sense. "I'll handle it. Finish getting your pastries."

Tony looks surprised, but his hand is already in his pocket, getting his phone.

The agent is obviously getting ready to leave, glad to be rid of the Avenger's slutty debauched drug-addicted omega, Steve thinks. It irritates him more than it should. "Agent. Get the medications our Na Stark requires. You may deliver them to patient room 7. Thank you for your assistance today."

The agent's eyes go wide. He glances at Tony, who is tapping at his phone again, ignoring the world in his effort to get whatever it is taken care of. Probably a welcome home party fit for a king.

"Patient room seven," Steve repeats pleasantly. "Thank you so much, agent."

The agent looks at Tony again. Tony flaps his hand at him, like brushing off a fly, now telling someone named Sarah that they'll need to go to Storage Unit 13, case 29, and how long will it take?

"Yes, Captain," the agent says.

*

The welcome home party *is* fit for a king.

Steve looks around the large bedroom. For New York, it's palatial. Steve's not sure he's even been on this floor of Stark House before, but the complex maze of security, elevators, and more security make him unsure. This is near the top, so it has a splendid view of the city.

The windows in this apartment aren't floor to ceiling, the way Steve has seen in skyscrapers, but instead have deep window wells and mouldings and built in benches. Today, the gray sky patters rain against the glass in tiny droplets. The city and her buildings are darker, stained with it, but it's lovely.

Steve isn't sure how Tony managed it, but the apartment is furnished. The man only had three hours, but Tony moves in mysterious and genius-eccentric ways.

Steve's only glanced through the apartment (yes, checking for potential threats, but he isn't going to feel guilty about it) but it appears to be full of classic furniture in a handmade style that's far older than Steve. A desk is arranged near another of these amazing windows, the top so large and so shining that it could be a mirrored lake, but is instead polished whorled wood so smooth the single stack of paper on it seems to float. Bookcases, side tables, a comfortable couch draped with what Steve can smell is a cashmere blanket.

But it's the bedroom that Steve's drawn to.

The walls must have already been painted the rich old-fashioned cream, because Steve can't smell any paint, and the crown mouldings are the original (or restored, or who knows, custom remade) highly polished maple. Steve can smell the beeswax. The floors are the wider planks that Steve misses desperately, but rarely sees anymore. These, too, have been polished, this time with carnauba wax, but not recently. The scent melds with the soft wool and silk of the enormous Persian carpet spread across the floor like a benediction.

Steve took off his boots as soon as he saw it. He is not walking on art, no matter what Tony says.

Against one wall is a dresser, and Steve recognizes the small collection of objects arranged on a silver tray. Knife oil. Wrist band. Earpiece. Spare passport collection.

Clint's things.

Steve is sure the dresser and the closed closet door are even now full of freshly delivered ridiculously expensive pajamas and soft socks and loose tee shirts and handsome robes. There will be suits, too, but not until Tony's tailor has arrived for a fitting (scheduled for

tomorrow, if Steve's eavesdropping is any judge) to make sure the suits will accommodate any changes to preferred weaponry and or size.

But it's the bed that Steve is looking at, keeps being drawn back to.

It's huge of course, because this is Tony, and Tony is baffled by small beds at the best of times. And there's an absurdly soft duvet and sheets in rich masculine dark blue, with a huge wall of pillows in blues and reds picked up from the Persian art gracing the floor. Steve's not even amazed that Tony seems to have had the bedding washed several times so they smell only of the faint magnolia-lavender detergent Tony favors and not the hard metallic-chemical-bleach of SHIELD medical sheets or the sharp plastic reek that clings to everything new in this world.

No, the amazing thing is curled in the bed, under the covers, asleep.

It's Clint, not wearing his tee shirt but (Steve assumes, well, OK, *hopes*) is wearing his pants, curled up as sweetly as a child. The lines in his face have relaxed, and Steve knows that Tony is the one who decided on how much medication Clint was allowed to have.

Steve remembers clearly the rant he interrupted when he'd gone to check on Clint before the transport back home. Tony saying, "He's been in fucking agony for two months, and his body won't handle the jolt, otherwise. I know what I'm doing. Have you lot managed anything with your medical marvels in this room? No? That's what I thought. Fucking stand aside, then. First do no harm, my ass." The SHIELD doctor had thrown up his hands at last, and Tony had handed Clint a small paper cup. Clint had knocked the pills back without even looking, chugged them with water, and leaned into Tony's side, still trembling.

It had taken only about ten minutes for the lines on Clint's face to begin smoothing out, and then another twenty for the trembling to stop. The whole time, Tony sat on Clint's bed cross-legged, arguing into his phone and occasionally petting Clint's hair.

Steve had done paperwork in one of the hard plastic chairs, ignoring the discomfort from long habit. He was sure that Tony knew Steve was guarding them, but for whatever reason, Tony didn't mention it.

If Steve didn't know better, he'd think that Tony had let him into Coulson's new apartment specifically to guard Barton until Natasha arrives with their new housemate.

Steve watches the rain fall, listens to Clint's even breathing, inhales the comforting scents. Beeswax and rich wool, old oak and sleeping packmate.

*

It's another half hour before Steve hears Tony and Natasha arrive. There are other people, too. Not many, maybe ten, but their voices are all warm and light, happy. Steve can hear the laughter, the gentle talk, the rustle of presents being opened, glasses clinking in toasts. Steve isn't offended to be left out of the party. He understands now, what his mate is doing. Easing Coulson back, step by step, into this strange new world of being alive again. It's at Tony's

own supersonic speed, but Steve is sure he's right. There will be no medicine like Clint, so the sooner they're reunited the better.

But bonds are tricky things, and broken bonds are even trickier.

So Steve waits, guarding Clint, relaxing into the sound of the rain.

*

It must be a good two hours before Steve hears the last of the guests leave. There's a further rustle, Natasha's voice, then Tony's, then Coulson's. No, Phil's.

"Ready, birthday boy?" Tony asks.

"As if you could stop me," Coulson says. "Don't make me use this."

"Hey now, I didn't make that for you so you could use it on me," Tony says, but his voice is warm, unworried.

The door opens, and Steve watches Coulson step inside. He looks, well, terrible. Like a man who'd been presumed dead for a couple months. Like a man who'd had a spear shoved into his heart. Pasty skin, shadowed eyes, smelling of sick and medicine.

Then Coulson sees Clint, and all that falls away.

The hit of possessive pheromones is so strong that Steve pinches his nostrils shut in self-defense and a belated attempt at privacy. He's not sure whether talking will help or hurt, but he feels compelled to say, "We kept him safe for you."

Coulson steps into the room, bare feet making no sound on the wood or the glorious carpet. He never takes his eyes off Clint. When he gets to the bed, Steve steps carefully back and away, but Coulson pays no heed. He climbs up, and only then does Clint open dilated eyes, smile softly. "Hey, babe. What took you so long?"

Then they're kissing, and Steve has to look away.

He slips out of the room, shuts the door behind him. Tony and Natasha are waiting in the hall, both looking expectant.

"Well?" Tony demands, but he smells nervous.

Steve just smiles.

"Ha!" Tony says, doing a small boxing champ impression. "Am I good or what?"

"Or what," Natasha says. "They were bonded, Stark. What did you think would happen?"

"Shows what you know, alpha-girl. Come on, Steven, I saved you pastries."

Steve follows to the living room. He's not especially hungry, but he can always eat. It would be rude not to try pastries Tony set aside just for him. "Was there a danger it *wouldn't* go well?"

Tony's already removing a large china plate from what is apparently a TV cupboard. "What? Well of course."

"What do you mean, of course?" Natasha demands. "Stark, if you fucked with Coulson--"

"Oh for Christ's sake." Tony shoves the plate at Steve. "Most betas die if their bonded goes. You know that. It's not like re-uniting a broken pair is an everyday thing. You seem to think they'll just snap back together like a rubber band stretched too thin or, I don't know, slotting back together like a dove-join."

Natasha frowns. Steve can't blame her. He had kind of expected that. Why wouldn't they? Their bond had been beautiful, and there had to be a matching hole in each their hearts.

Tony just shrugs, reading their expressions easily. "Real life ain't a fairy tale, folks, and physics will fuck your shit up as hard as biology, given half a chance. Look, if it had been two seconds after, they probably would have snapped back together. But Clint's mind isn't run with a pressurized hull."

Oh no. Steve swallows. "Something had to fill the vacuum."

"Something, yes," Tony agrees. "Fortunately, Clint's mind is full of hot air, so it seems to have worked out."

"Why the narcotics?" Natasha asks.

"Keep his heart from stopping when Coulson touches him," Tony says absently, picking at a pastry. "What? I told *him*, excuse me if I was too busy to write an approved-format team memo copied to everyone."

"A little additional information would have been appreciated," Steve says, but he's too glad Clint is OK to lecture further.

Tony gives him a pastry. "Whatever. Try this one. Hazelnut and chocolate. You'll like it."

"Is this really a pastry moment?" Steve asks.

"No, you're right. What was I thinking? Natasha--vodka? Champagne?"

"I cannot believe I am saying this, but I believe this is a pastry moment." Natasha plucks one from the plate. "How did you find Budapest style Hungarian pastries?"

"You can have anything delivered in Manhattan," Tony says, waving that off. He seems pleased, though. "I'm glad you approve."

Natasha licks cream from her upper lip. "He could have died."

"Yes," Tony agrees, taking another pastry for himself. "But he didn't."

"Thank you, katyonak."

Tony looks down, away, puts his pastry back, checks pastry after pastry, muttering about looking for one with Bavarian cream but no almonds.

Natasha lays a hand on his arm.

Tony looks up, and Steve can smell the quick burst of uncertainty in his scent, the hint of fear. Natasha's body is angled forward, her nearly-absent scent suddenly much stronger, dominant, a strong whiff of good black tea and winter wind. "Thank you, katyonak" she says, distinct and firm, fingers tight.

Tony drops his gaze, turns his head, submissive. As she steps back, her fingers on his arm slide away in a caress, familial, gentle. Tony lets out a soft sigh, and his shoulders loosen.

When Natasha hands him a small pastry, no cream, no filling, he takes it.

Chapter End Notes

Coulson's going to live at Stark House; this story's too off the rails to be Agents of SHIELD compliant.

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

This one's a bit short, so y'all get two chapters today.

Steve knows that Coulson is still very ill. He spends most of his time asleep. It's going to be a while before he'll be up for anything as vigorous as team poker night. Tony has already laid down the law about the timeline for rebonding. Not until Coulson's health is better, not until the two have a lot of shared positive emotional experiences (Tony waggles his eyebrows meaningfully), not until Tony decides how best to go about it. When Phil raises his own eyebrow at Steve, asking what the team leader thinks of Tony just taking charge in this, Steve just tips his head at Tony.

At the first shared Sunday breakfast, Tony sets a plate of over easy eggs, whole wheat toast, and a small fruit cup in front of Coulson.

No one else has been served yet, and usually Tony makes Steve's first. It's something no one talks about, and to Steve, it's backwards. Tony should eat first, but Tony has an uneasy relationship with eating. Steve has given up (for now) on making Tony fix himself a full breakfast and has settled for making sure that Tony gets some form of juice, milk-based coffee drinks, or small sweets.

Coulson looks surprised at the food, almost as if he doesn't expect Tony to be able to cook. Maybe he's just surprised that it's appetizing.

Around his Sunday cigarette, Tony says, "I asked Clint. Eat it while it's hot and don't dip your toast in the wet yolks and wave them around. It creeps me out."

Coulson watches Tony retreat back to the stove, then digs in.

Clint just props his chin in his hand, tattoo dark against his skin, and says, "He makes good huevos rancheros and he does a mean chilaquiles, if you catch him in a good mood."

"I heard that, Barton," Tony mutters. "But we'd better wait for your mate's stomach to get better before throwing chiles at it."

"Just thought he should have something to look forward to," Clint says, watching Phil eat like it's the most fascinating thing in the world. To Clint, it probably is.

Tony sets Steve's plate down in front of him. Today it's scrambled eggs, a pan-fried steak, some kind of greens cooked with onions and spices that Tony says is Indian, and a large stack of toast.

Phil doesn't seem too surprised by the size of the plate, but he blinks when Tony sets two other ones down at Steve's place (Steve's beloved breakfast potatoes and a large bowl of fruit sprinked with nuts and fresh coconut).

"Don't even start with me, Barton," Tony says before Clint can say a word. "If you ate your fruit, I'd make you your own potatoes."

"That's harsh, mom," Clint says. "I hate fruit."

"Suck it up, buttercup." Tony's voice is fond. Steve knows that more than half the time, Tony puts the potatoes on his plate anyway. "That's the rule. You want peppers in your omelette today or just the usual?"

"I want it loaaaaded, baby." Clint says.

"Don't you always." Tony waggles his eyebrows, because he flirts like he's breathing.

Steve eats his eggs, enjoying the banter. When Tony goes to the stove again, Phil is looking curiously at Clint, then Steve, and back again.

"Don't worry," Clint says. "Steve's cool with it."

"Hmm," Phil says, watching Steve.

Steve isn't sure what to think about the expression on Phil's face. Considering, thoughtful, impressed.

Tony sets down Clint's plate, including a generous serving of potatoes.

"Sit with us," Steve says, touching Tony's elbow.

Tony gives him a long look, but he snags his coffee mug from the counter, pulls a chair out backwards, sits with his forearms crossed on the chair back.

They pass the time easily, mostly discussing when Natasha will be back from her assignment in Canada, where she's talking to Bruce. When Phil's done, Clint takes him back upstairs.

Steve gets up to do the dishes, as he always does on Sunday, and Tony moves so he can sprawl comfortably in a chair to watch. He claims to find watching someone do dishes by hand an exciting example of living history, an anthropological experiment right here in his very own home. Steve would like to think that Tony just enjoys keeping him company, but he could be fooling himself.

"How was therapy?" Tony asks.

Steve gathers more cups. He's surprised by the question. Tony can be blunt, but he hasn't asked Steve about therapy for a while. "It went fine."

"Did you tell her about the incident?"

Steve looks at the dishes, decides to just sit back down. Clint and Phil won't be back, and besides, Jarvis alerts Tony to visitors if he's having a private conversation. "About me losing my temper or about you throwing yourself to the ground like a killdeer to snap me out of it?"

Tony lights a second cigarette. "Both."

"I did," Steve says. "I have more exercises."

"Naturally." Tony takes a long drag. "A lot of people would have just tossed the fucker off the deck and been done with it. I would have."

"No, you wouldn't," Steve says, sure of it. "Besides, if you wanted, all you had to do was not stop me. Why did you?"

"I told you. You'd have hated the brig. Fury'd be embarrassed to arrest you. Nobody likes to arrest Captain America."

"I could have killed him."

"Nah. You'd have blacked his one good eye, but you wouldn't have killed him." Tony sounds sure, almost lazy about it. "You were nowhere near angry enough for that. A scrap, yes, a killing frenzy, no."

Steve is annoyed to realize that after Dr Katz had discussed all his symptoms, his feelings and actions, she'd said much the same.

"Look, Steven, the reason I'm having coffee here with you instead of working on the StarkPhone 3.1 upgrade is that I'm pissed."

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have--"

Tony cuts his hand through the air, cutting Steve off. "Let me finish. Do you know who got me to that deck? Natasha had me *paged*. I heard it on the damn loud speaker." Tony's voice switched to a nasal flat tone, "Na Tony Stark, proceed immediately to Deck 7, hanger bay 5. Na Tony Stark, proceed to Deck 7, hangar bay 5."

Steve had been so deep into his hunt he hadn't even noticed.

The hand with the cigarette jabs at him. "I get that going into overdrive is a potentially embarrassing and dangerous thing. I get that you'd rather have perfect control of yourself one-hundred percent of the time. I get that you probably loathe that a slutty little bottom with more money than sense is effectively the only person who can have any influence over you when you get like this. Believe me, as someone who goes through the occasional heat, I absolutely sympathize."

Steve looks down at his hands. He hadn't thought of it quite that way.

"But," Tony says, leaning forward. "The truth is, I have a better chance of at least channeling your anger into a...different direction."

Steve looks up. "You know what I could do, when I'm like that."

"Yes, I do." Tony reaches out, scarred hand on Steve's large clean ones. "It's just sex, Steven. If you need a warm body to bury yourself in, I can take it."

"It's not fair."

Tony doesn't look away. "Life isn't fair. But if you have the choice to fuck me or beat the shit out of our boss, maybe fucking me is the less awful option."

"I don't want to use you that way."

Tony pats him on the shoulder and gets up. "Yes, I know."

"Tony?" Steve says.

Tony turns, cigarette butt still hanging at his lip, eyes already far away, full of electronics and ideas and tech. "Yeah, babe?"

"Are there things you would....rather I do? Or not do? If it ever happens?"

Just for a second, Steve smells a hint of surprise, warmth, then it's gone again, muted under Tony's carefully blanked expression and the cigarette. "Blowjobs, face fucking, that's fine. I like being fucked. Don't ask me to mount someone else without some lead time. You can come anywhere you want, in me or on me. I'd rather you not ask me to lick your boots because I hate the taste of polish, but most other dominance displays are fine. You can pull my hair, make me behave, fuck me in front of people."

Steve's hands are gripping his knees. He swallows hard. Tony must have prepared this list in advance? Or maybe he has all this memorized for all his lovers? Maybe it's extemporaneous?

Tony takes a last drag on his cigarette. "And the neck thing. I don't usually let people do that, but you can, if you want."

With a last flashing smile, he's gone.

Steve's alone in the kitchen with a mess of dirty dishes and his cock hard in his pants.

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

FYI: The photo that Steve sees is one of the mildest of them, early on in the proceedings.

A Celebration of Heroes: Washington, DC

All Proceeds From This Event benefit the Federal, State, NASA and SHIELD employees and their families who were killed or wounded in action during recent events.

Special Guests Include: Seventeen United States Senators, Forty One United States Representatives, FEMA Director, and

Captain America

Please Note: Due to circumstances outside our control, ACoH is not able to fully guarantee the presence of any one particular guest. Tickets to this event will not be refunded due to acts of God, alien presence, invasion on CONUS soil, or similar circumstances. ACoH will do its best to find equivalent guests if any one guest is unable to attend. In the event of rain, this event will be held....

Tony tugs at his tie. It's way too warm to be wearing a suit all afternoon, and the damn Kevlar body armor Captain Paranoid insisted he add under it is *not helping*. Tony should have told him to fuck off and die, but Steve was wearing that extra-earnest expression. All chiseled jaw and one strand of hair in his eyes, looking like a forties-version of, well, Captain America. "But Tony, what if you were really hurt, that would be *terrible*," and he'd crumpled like a wet paper towel.

The lady next to him is Tony's rep for the event. She's wearing the politician version of uniform, a navy blue suit, white shell, and red-white-and-blue accessory pin (a flag, how dull) pinned to her lapel. "And our next special guest is Senator Harrison, from Arkansas."

Tony wonders if her voice is ever not-perky. (Would she be perky introducing additional alien invaders? 'And our next special guest is Zrrrrrrrxt Ashkrathax, from the Planet Zrk. He's been an alien overlord for fifteen years!')

"Yeah, hey," Tony says absently, shaking Senator Harrison's hand. "How's it shakin'?"

The Senator smiles, and he looks as zoned as Tony feels. "I'm doing well, Na Stark, and you?"

"Doin' fine, thanks."

Senator Harrison moves down the line to the next special guest. Yep, definitely on auto-pilot. Or maybe he's an animatronic robot. Tony likes to blow time at these gigs by imagining how he could take over the world. Maybe he should pick animatronic senatorial robots for today's fantasy playland--is that too similar to what Clint went through? Would it be tacky? Well, fuck, who cares. Clint would probably find it funny.

The chic next to him pipes, "And this is Representative York, from South Dakota."

"Yeah, hey," Tony says. York's hair is a rug--that will make it easier. He can just slap the rug on his congressional robot, no one will be able to tell. "How's those new Department of Transportation kickbacks treating you, York?"

Next to him, Ms Perkster doesn't even blink. Tony's been pulling this all afternoon, and she's probably immune now. Unless she's also a robot, too. Could be, really.

"If you mean the exciting new highway we're building between Pierre and Deadwood--" Rep York says.

"Pointless 34 million dollar four lane extravaganza for a state with the population less than this city, but hey, who's counting." Tony finishes the handshake and is already looking to his next victim. Intro. Whatever.

He hears York huff, but move off. Yep, no rejoinder. Course not.

"And this is Ms Rachel Grant, owner of--" Ms Perky breaks off.

Tony looks over, he hadn't heard anything. But now he notices the sudden lull. Ms Perky's political senses must be tingling, because there's a sudden "But *sir*!" and all hell breaks loose in the crowd by the water tent.

Oh fuck, Tony thinks, and then he's running. He'd left Cap over there signing autographs. Steve only has one fifteen minute break all afternoon, and he'd seemed perfectly happy to spend it scribbling Sincerely Steven Rogers all over various photographs, invitations, and cocktail napkins. That's Tony's idea of hell, but once Tony made sure Steven did get at least one bottle of water and one sandwich, Tony'd left him to it.

Tony pushes through the crowd of rich politicos, using vicious elbow jabs where needed. "Jarvis, what is going on?"

It's probably rude to keep your phone actually turned on during an entire afternoon's event, but Tony's never worried about shit like that. Etiquette is for other people.

"I'm sorry sir, but Captain Rogers is not answering his phone, and he turned me off once you left line of sight."

"And you didn't tell me? Jesus, Jarvis."

"I am very sorry, Sir. Satellite photography does not indicate any explosions in the immediate vicinity, and--"

"Stark!" It's Coulson, looking worried. Oh no. This cannot be good. "Stark, get over here!"

Tony dodges through the crowd, running as best he can. He skids to a stop next to Coulson, and then he smells it. *Fight*. Alpha fight. Not pretending, not skirting the edges like the last few times, but the real deal. True full on Alpha fight.

"Oh fuck." Tony hasn't seen many of these, but he's seen a few. You hang around with military guys long enough, and you'll see one eventually. It's always terrifying, and it's always made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

The air reeks of it, like hot dark ozone on a still day, burning the nostrils.

"Stark, listen to me," Coulson is saying. "I need you to go in there, and--"

But Tony's ignoring him. He recognizes both the scents, and one of them makes his stomach roil. Sharp, high, like bitter sandalwood and ozone. He hasn't smelled it in years, but he'll never forget it. The other is like sun-dried sheets, bright, but with a brittle edge now, hard.

He shoves past a couple of morons just standing there. Coulson grabs his arm. "You don't know what you're doing. Listen to me, I've had training in this."

"And I had twelve years of Deportment lessons," Tony snaps at him. "Maybe you should shut the fuck up."

Surprisingly, Coulson lets go.

Tony pushes forward, breaks into the circle of onlookers. Well, *fuck*.

Why can't he be wrong, just once, Tony wonders. Why can't his genius brain deduce and have the answer turn out to be whoops, no, it really isn't as bad as you feared, here have a cupcake.

Pacing back and forth like a large gold panther is Steve. He should look absurd in his summer gray suit and Captain America tie, but he doesn't. He just looks deadly. His right hand is curled into a fist, and Tony can see that his knuckles are already starting to heal.

Leaning against one of the tables is Senator fucking Fromm.

"Hello, Tony," Senator Fromm says, not looking away from Steve. He's got a split lip, but he still looks pretty spry for a guy who has to be pushing seventy.

"Don't you even talk to him," Steve says to the Senator, because Steve is a maniac who doesn't notice the cell phone cameras the Washington glitterati are already using to record everything.

Tony edges into the circle, moving as slowly and carefully as he can. If he moves quickly, he's going to make this a whole lot worse.

"I have every right to talk to him. Don't I, Tony?" The Senator's eyes never leave Steve, but he must be aware of Tony's movements. "Did you tell your handsome new friend here what a troublemaker you were back then?"

Tony doesn't answer, because he's not stupid. Much as he'd very much like to rip Senator Fuckface a new one, Steve would not like it. Right now, what Steve wants, Steve gets. It's the only way any of them are getting out alive.

Right on cue, Steve growls at the Senator. It's low, vicious, serious, bared-teeth, narrowed-eyes.

But Fromm's a lot meaner than he looks, and Tony's pretty sure he's playing it up for the cameras. Won't help the fucker if Steve rips off his head and pees down his neck, but maybe Fromm still has faith in Steve's innate goodness.

"Did you tell him how hard it was for you to obey, but how much you loved it once you did? Or maybe, Tony, it's that you've forgotten how to obey. Maybe you've forgotten your nature under all the cheap sex and sleazy one night stands. It's terrible what Stane did to you, Tony. I know it wasn't your fault."

Jesus Christ, not here, Tony thinks. God dammit, shut up. Dick-nosed weasel. He's getting closer to his goal, but he just can't move fast enough.

Steve's growling is lowering in register, and it's making Tony shiver and sweat. He's got to risk it. "Captain, I'm right here. I'm just fine. You know that. I'm fine. You're keeping me safe, Captain."

"Safe," Steve repeats, in that low, dark rumble. It really should not be hot, but under the circumstances, Tony tells his brain to go for it. Look at how beautiful Steve is, how hot he sounds, how safe Tony feels near him.

"That's right," Tony says. "Safe."

And of course, Fromm ruins it, because he's still a fucking suicidal asshole. "I don't think Tony is all that safe. I heard he was giving free blow jobs at Jane Bishop's birthday party."

Which is true, but *not helpful*.

Before Tony can figure out whether to deny it (Steve will smell the lie, he's sure) or try to explain (had a bad day, nearly died, these things happen if you're Tony, it seemed like a good idea at the time), Fromm is still talking. "I was Tony's first, you know, and he was like a frightened deer, all long limbs and big eyes. Beautiful. Difficult at first, as many spirited omegas are, but once he understood what he should do, he was so good for me. So very, very good."

The phrases are the same as Fromm used back then. Tony's furious, but he can't stop the warm pleasure the praise brings. Goddamn conditioning.

"He was so willing, once he understood. I'm sorry Stane took him over. That's who's at fault here, Stane. He's the one who let Tony get out of hand."

Steve's growling is louder now, a rumble even some of the idiots in the crowd can hear. A few of them are backing up. It gives Tony more room to sidle closer. "Captain, I want you to listen to my voice. Things are different now, and I'm safe. I'm fine, and you've been keeping me--"

"Not very well, though, as I hear it," Fromm says. "Promiscuous, difficulty sleeping, losing weight, can't bond."

"Will you *shut up*," Tony hisses at Fromm, and it's stupid. He knows better, he does, he just forgot.

Steve whips his head around and glares at Tony. "You don't talk to him."

Tony holds up his hands. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'm sorry. Steve, look at me. Can you smell how sorry I am?" That's the truth, even if it's not the truth in the way either of them probably want.

Tony knows he's reeking of pheromones himself. Arousal, fear, and yes, lots and lots of 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again'--probably with added 'why not fuck it out of me as a punishment' knowing his treacherous biology.

Fromm's just got to push things, of course. "Doesn't he apologize beautifully? I taught him that. You should see how he can go down on his knees, mouth open. He's perfect like that. It's what he needs. Of course, Stane tried to tell him otherwise, but if he's yours now, I can show you how to do it. How to make him--"

Tony has never hated anyone in his life more than he hates Fromm right now. It's nothing Steve probably hasn't guessed, but Christ, it's humiliating.

Steve's nostrils flare, and his eyes narrow, and Tony gets a hit of even stronger Fight pheromones. Well, hell. In about two seconds, Steve's going to murder a long-serving Senator in front of a crowd of people, probably with his bare hands.

Tony needs to fix this. Right now. Very carefully, knowing Steve's watching him closely, Tony raises his own hand and slides it through his hair. Steve's gaze tracks Tony's hand, and Tony feels his body tensing at being at the center of all that concentration.

Tony's fingers find the back of his own neck, and he drags his hand down. It's not anywhere as good as when an alpha does it, but he's had an exhibitionist streak for years. It's arousing as hell to show off at the best of times, and showing off for Steve, well.

Showing off for Steve adds a hell of a kick. It's like sexual freefall, diving out a plane and arrowing his body to a target on the ground below.

"I'm feeling very upset, Captain," Tony says, hearing his own voice go low, rough. "Do you believe what Fromm's saying? Because that's what I'm afraid of. You believe *him*, instead of

me." It's crazy, yes, but Steve, he wants the strangest things, and Tony'd been taught that in a true Fight state, you give the alpha what he wants, no matter what.

Otherwise, people die.

Sometimes, lots of people. Sometimes, lots and lots of people.

Steve tips his head to one side, scenting Tony. "I can smell him on you."

"Probably," Tony agrees, running both hands up and down his neck in lazy strokes, blatantly sensual, indulgent, sexual. Come on, Rogers, take what's on offer. "I was handed over to him in marriage, and he marked me. It was part of the contract. Haven't been able to get it off completely. I don't like it. I don't like smelling him, it makes me nervous."

Steve frowns, like it's kind of upsetting. "Shouldn't smell like him."

"But I do," Tony says. The lassitude is making it difficult to think. Come on, brain, work with me here. "It was my first marriage contract, totally legal, had to do it to save the company. Appropriations bills. You know what it makes me feel like to smell him on me, Steven?"

Fromm, of course, starts making suggestions. Aroused. Submissive. Owned. All those good old fashioned traditional words.

Steve's still listening to Fromm with one ear, half his attention pulled away, and Tony's not sure this plan will work. Tony strokes his hands up the back of his neck, up over his head. It should send a nice dose of pheromones to Steve, but Steve's turned his head, is back to glaring at Fromm. This is not good.

"Unprotected," Tony murmurs, knowing Steve's hearing will catch the words, and hoping like hell the cell phones won't. "That's how I feel when I smell his stench on me, and I want--*oof*."

Steve's tackle isn't exactly unexpected, but it's still painful. Tony's now wrapped in a million pounds of silk-suited muscles. Steve's growls have switched to worried sniffs and grumbles as Steve inspects him all over, patting everything with careful hands and following up with his nose.

The Fight scent hasn't dissipated, but Tony's hopeful that he's successfully redirected it. God damn Fromm is going to owe him, but Tony doubts the Senator will acknowledge the debt. If Tony gets bent over right here, he's going to make Coulson pay, too. Bastard should have seen this coming. He's got all their files, and he's smart enough to keep Fromm from Steve.

"Don't like it," Steve's muttering, "Don't like it."

"I know, big guy, me either. Privacy, maybe? You could take me someplace nice and safe, right?"

That's the wrong approach, because suddenly Steve's head pops up and he roars at the people still standing in a dumbstruck circle. They all flinch but before they can flee, Steve adds, at

top volume, "Please proceed in an orderly manner to the exits."

"Uh, Steve," Tony says, "these folks paid for a ticket. Sure, they got more of a show than they bargained for, but how about *you and I* just leave. That would be good, right? You can take me someplace nice and secure. This is a little exposed, for my preferences."

Steve tucks his nose into Tony's collarbone and snuffles thoughtfully. It would be sort of cute if it wasn't all so life and death. "He used a gag, didn't he."

Tony shuts up whatever he was going to say, brain going blank. Steve nuzzles various parts of Tony's jaw and cheek and left ear and then returns to the collarbone for who-knows-what reason. "Well," Tony says carefully, because he can't exactly lie right now, Steve will smell it, but admitting anything about his experiences under Fromm could trigger the Fight again, "he's not the only one."

Steve lets out a sad sounding sigh. "I don't like it."

"Me either," Tony says, caught into telling the truth. "Look, I can see you're a little worried about that, but can we go? Seriously, I'm feeling very exposed here, and the confessions aren't exactly helping. A little comfort and solitude, Rogers, maybe some nice extra security measures courtesy of Jarvis, I'd appreciate it."

Which is when Steve's large warm hand settles on his neck with quiet authority. Tony's eyes roll back in his head and he's pretty sure he just moaned by complete accident. Steve's hand tightens, his thumb strokes once, twice, then he tucks Tony against his chest. Tony's too loose and relaxed to do anything but melt against him, drowsy and aroused and this is like being shit-faced drunk for the first time, Jesus Christ. It's better than the anti-anxiety pills the nurse gave him, it's better than anything, but it's also kind of shuts his brain off.

"Coulson," Steve says, voice firm. "I need a secure transport out of here. I want any footage of Na Stark confiscated, on my direct order."

"Certainly, Captain."

"And do something with the pinnacle of hardworking America over there, or *I will*."

"Yes, Captain, you have my word. Come along, Senator Fromm."

Tony's even more hazy, because that soft thumb brush against the back of his neck is not stopping. It's like being petted, except on the inside, and Tony's not even that aroused, he's just feeling full and weird and sleepy. He noses closer into Steve's warmth, and another of those large arms encircle him.

It might be a moment later, it might be an hour, Tony's lifted up, shifted, carried into a vehicle. He can't quite make his eyes open, but he feels quite safe. Steve's not going to let anything happen to him. Then there's the purr of rotors, and a rumble, and they're in the air.

"Tony? Tony, can you hear me?"

"Mmm," Tony says. He can, he just doesn't want to. So comfortable.

"Tony, can you wake up for me?"

Tony gets his eyes open. He's face up in Captain America's lap, head on Steve's thigh. Steve's hand is off his neck at last, but Steve's petting his hair. It should be disturbing. It isn't.

Steve's smile is wry. "I'm sorry. I think I just caused a national incident."

"Don't worry about it, Pepper will fix it." Tony's eyes drift closed again. "Pepper's good at fixing my national incidents. Give her the 'I'm Sorry Pepper' Floral Arrangement #7 and the 'Oh Shit Pepper' #5 gift basket. 's fine."

"You number them." Steve sounds amused now.

"Mmhm. Have to. Keep track."

"Of course. Tony, look, I'm really sorry."

"Mmhmm." Tony's ready to drift off again.

"I know you told me some things, but I'm still not very good at reading between the lines. I shouldn't have listened when that man started talking. He introduced himself and I recognized his name, and I, well, I just was surprised, and then he just made me so mad."

"Steve?"

"Yes, Tony?" Steve hunches down nice and close. He's got the earnest look going again. It's pretty attractive, in a distant sort of way.

"Can we not talk about my ex-husband right now?"

"I think we should talk about him sometime."

"Don't wanna."

"Tony," Steve's voice is firm, commanding, and the wash of his pheromones goes straight to Tony's backbrain and lodges there.

Tony turns so he's baring his neck. "I'm sorry." And his mouth just carries on without him, as it likes to do, "I'm sorry, very sorry. Make it up to you. Be so good, I promise, I didn't mean to."

"Shhh," Steve says. "Shhh, Tony, no, it's OK. You're good. You're good. That's it. See, can't you feel how much I'm enjoying having you here just like this?"

Tony can smell it, Steve's arousal, the heavy line of Steve's cock, under him, but-- "I disobeyed."

"No, it's OK, you can do that."

"Can't," Tony says flatly. He wants to turn his head away, but that's not allowed.

Steve's face is thoughtful, considering. Very slowly, he slides a hand under Tony's neck, touching but not caressing. Tony goes still. He's not stupid, alphas have used his neck for punishment before. A good hard pinch there will send Tony into agony, the nerve clusters so prevalent that Tony has been known to retch and throw up from the pain of it. But he was disrespectful, and it never ever helps to struggle or explain. He has to take it, he knows it, even if he doesn't like it.

"Can," Steve says, and his thumb slides across the sensitive nape of Tony's neck.

Tony's eyes roll back again, oh God, that feels good. It's like being in heat when Steve does it. He's hard, he's relaxed, he's probably spread his legs by now.

"Huh," Steve says. "Tony, look at me."

It's difficult, but Tony forces his eyes to focus. Steve's face is close, eyes intent. "Tony, you can disagree with me when you're like this. I want you to."

That just doesn't make any amount of sense whatsoever. Tony's so blissed out, though, it's hard to care too much. "You're batshit insane, Rogers. Anybody tell you that?"

Whoops.

Then Steve's stroking right over that place again, and he's saying, "That was very very good, Tony. Just like that. You were very good for me."

Tony's back arches in pleasure, and he's wet now. "What the hell did I do?" Because whatever it is, he'll do it again. God, don't stop.

"You disagreed with me," Steve says. It doesn't make a single lick of sense. None whatsoever.

"I don't get it," Tony admits.

"I know," Steve says. He sounds sad, but then he's petting Tony again, and it's glorious. "That's it. Just like that. You're so good, there."

Tony's eyes are shut and his breathing is ragged. He hasn't been this turned on in a long time, and he has no idea what the fuck is going on. Maybe Rogers is kinkier than he looks. "You really didn't like the gags, did you?" Whoops, he'd just said that, too.

"I really didn't," Steve agrees.

"Don't see why. Lots of pictures of me with that shit in my mouth. They like the o-ring best."

"Who does, Tony?" Steve's hand has switched to stroking his hair, smoothing out Tony's clothes. Probably for the best, since Tony's having trouble tracking words.

"Mmm? Everybody, really. If you jam it in right, my mouth is easy to fuck. And I've got absolutely no gag reflex. You'll love it."

Not surprisingly, this gets Steve to go back to the petting. Ha, Tony thinks, see, you do love it. You just won't admit it.

"No, that's not why."

"Did I say that aloud?"

"You did." Steve's voice is fond and amused, but his hands are gentle, stroking Tony's jaw and temples, careful massages to tight muscles there. "But I didn't reward you for telling me about the gag. I rewarded you for arguing with me."

"You're shitting me." Ohhhhh god, there it is again, that soft delicious stroke. Tony arches into it like a cat, rubs himself against Steve.

"See? I like it when you argue." Steve's hands are running through his hair, warm and large.

"But everyone likes to shut me up."

"You're just saying that to get me to do this."

"Nnnngh. Is it working?"

Steve laughs softly. "You know it is. You're a genius." His hands still, touching Tony, but not anywhere that will give him what he wants. "Can you focus on what I'm saying for a moment?"

"Maybe," Tony says reluctantly. He knows that tone. It's the 'here's what you did wrong and here's what we're going to do about it' tone. Tony is very, very familiar with that alpha tone of voice.

"I need you to focus, Tony."

Yep, right on track. It's a shame, because Tony doesn't know what he did wrong, and he's going to be quizzed on it, and not knowing always makes it worse. Steve will tell him he should have, Tony will get confused, things will go to shit. "OK."

"You did a really brave thing today, Tony."

Ah, the Shit Sandwich. Definitely Steve's style. One good thing, one very bad thing, one (tiny) good thing. Probably recommended in one of the books on modern relationships.

"You stepped into an alpha fight, and you defused it. No one got hurt today, and that's down to you. I lost control, and I let myself be baited, and you had to do a lot of scary, dangerous things to fix it."

Huh. Not how Tony would have put it.

"But I'm a little concerned."

Aha, here it comes. Tony opens his eyes warily. He wants every additional sense he can get.

"It was very clever of you to seduce me by touching your neck. I know that's a very sensitive part of your body, and I know how frightening it must have been to let those strangers see how easily you can be aroused by a touch there."

Which is also not what Tony is expecting to hear. "But?" Tony asks, wary as hell now.

"I'm sure it was also frightening to have me take you up on your offer, especially with your ex-husband still in the crowd. That was very courageous."

Tony props himself up on his elbows, the lassitude slowly fading under the onslaught of tension and fear.

"It's been a long time since I've lost myself into true Fight. I'm not sure you're aware of what was at stake, exactly."

"I've seen a couple of true Fights." Is that what this is about? "I spent a lot of time on bases, testing equipment and weapons."

Steve looks at him. "But probably not fights where an omega is involved."

"Actually," Tony admits, sitting up. Is there booze on this bird? Damn, it's a SHIELD copter, so of course not. Fuck his luck anyway. "One of the fights was. Military base housing allows bonded and married omegas, or omega children. It's the law." The fight had been....ugly. The MPs had been completely unable to break it up. "Tasers don't work on alphas in Fight, did you know? Fun fact."

Steve lets Tony move to his own seat, a few inches away. "There were fatalities."

"There were fatalities," Tony agrees. No weapons, either. The Fight had been brutal, bare-handed. Not just the three alphas, but a bunch of their beta friends. The MPs hadn't had a clear shot, and they didn't know who started it. Tony remembers exactly who ended it, though. The short, dark-haired Marine in BDUs, hands red, face smeared with blood. The omega, shaking by the door of the cracker-box apartment complex. The way everyone, alphas, betas, friends, MPs, had all turned away when he stalked over to her. The sharp gasp she made, then the other noises, pleasure and pain both. "To the victor go the spoils," Tony says, remembering.

"Yes," Steve agrees.

"I was trained in breaking up Fights," Tony says. Where the hell are they, anyway? He doesn't recognize the countryside.

"What did your training say to do?"

"Give the senior alpha whatever he wants."

"Ah," Steve says, looking at his hands. "*Whatever* he wants?"

Tony looks over at him, nods. "Whatever he wants. It's the best chance to save lives."

"So that's what you did."

"Yes." Tony doesn't like the expression on Steve's face--embarrassed, ashamed? "It was a Fight, Steve. I wasn't going to let you kill a whole bunch of people with your bare hands. If that meant getting myself fucked in front of half of Congress, well, I've gotten laid for worse reasons."

"Is that what you were expecting? That I'd just--take you right there?"

"I'm still surprised you haven't tossed me to the carpet. Or the grass, as the case may be."

Steve winces, looks away.

"I can't believe you're this embarrassed about the sex part. I'd have thought punching a United States Senator at a charity do would have been the sticking point, but it's the after party fucking that's getting your knickers in a twist? Only you, Rogers."

Steve scowls. "I'm not going to be embarrassed about punching him. That fella was a real jerk."

Tony raises his eyebrows. The pheromones are hot and heady again, sharp. "Allrighty then, excuse my mentioning it."

Steve still looks grumpy. "He said some very unkind things."

"Which is worth punching, apparently. OK."

"About *you*," Steve says.

"Batshit insane, Rogers. I stand by my diagnosis. You know whatever he said was probably true, right?"

Steve is looking stubborn again, and his lower lip is stuck out like he's pouting. "It was not. I do have a question, though."

"Yeah, yeah, spit it out. If it's about Fromm, though, I demand neck-pets. For the sake of my blood pressure. I'm sure Jarvis would agree it's the least you can do."

"Not about him." Steve scoots closer. "About a different marriage. He said, during your third marriage that--"

Tony whips around. "I don't talk about that. Not *ever*, Rogers. Not with you. Not with anyone. Are we clear?"

Steve holds his hands up, careful and still. "Very clear."

Tony relents, because fuck, Steve will poke around. Might as well. "I'm sure you can find out all you want if you search Tony Stark teenage gangbang and click images. Just don't ask me about it. OK?"

"Not OK," Steve says. "Not remotely OK. Fromm had a picture, that's how this started. He wanted me to autograph it, but--"

"Jesus *fuck*." No wonder there had been a Fight. "Where the hell was Coulson? He's supposed to keep Fromm away from you."

"Something about a minor security breach. My point is, Tony, that whatever you think other people see in that, that *occasion*, from your past it may not be what I see."

There's nothing Tony can really say to that. Rogers is his own special snowflake. "Then what the hell did you want to ask?"

Steve bites his lip and Tony braces himself. "I wanted to ask whether that contract was Stane's first attempt to kill you."

Tony stares at him. Not one person, well, OK, besides Na Anderson who is a self-admitted paranoid eccentric when it comes to Obie, had ever put two and two together about that. "I don't know. There was no proof. At the time, he was...supportive."

"That would be the strategic move," Steve says.

"And it caused a major dip in Stark stock, which Obie cared a lot about."

"Good way to buy additional shares," Steve points out. "If you know a dip is coming, you could put out buy offers."

"Yes," Tony agrees. "There is that. But the answer is, I don't know."

"Thank you."

Tony looks back out the window. "For what?"

"For answering my question. I know it's a very painful subject." Steve scoots even closer.

Tony shrugs, trying to appear nonchalant. He's going to have nightmares tonight. That's how it works when his third marriage shows up in conversation.

A warm hand settles on his neck. Slowly, carefully, Steve's thumb caresses the short hairs at the base of his skull. "I mean it, thank you."

Tony lets his head drop forward until his forehead is resting against the cool glass. Below, Virginia countryside is spread out in rolling fields. Unless they're over somewhere else. He doesn't know. He shouldn't be letting Steve do this, but he's exhausted, and he was good, dammit, and for once he wants to just let go and enjoy the pleasure.

"You really are remarkably good at going under," Steve says, voice soft. "So responsive."

The praise makes Tony shiver.

"To the victor go the spoils," Steve murmurs into Tony's ear. "I know you're wondering what I'm going to do with you. I'm going to sit here, just like this, and listen to you talk."

"Talk?" Tony asks. His brain does good work, but Jesus. He's kind of off-line right now.

"Mmhm. I like to hear you talk. Just tell me about what you're working on. Circuits. Computers. Whatever you like."

"You want me to talk about work?" Tony's about as submissive as he gets, almost fully under, but god, he's confused. Dirty talk, yes, he can do that. No problem. Sucking cock, fine. Ripping off clothes, sure. But work talk? He's got to have misunderstood. Maybe it's a test.

"Sure, Tony. You can think of it like a test. Or consider it a kink. I know how good you can be. Do this for me, please. Just open your mouth..."

Tony obeys, breathing slow and even, aroused but in no hurry.

"And talk. Tell me about what's on your workbench. Can you do that for me, Tony?"

"Yes," Tony says. Most confusing alpha award goes to Captain fucking America. "I have a selection of tools on my workbench. Um. And some coffee mugs."

Steve's hand caresses him, gentle soothing strokes. The rest of the confusion and tension slide out of Tony, and he feels himself slide under all the way, surrounded by possessive alpha pheromones and that gentle grip. "Are the mugs empty or full?" Steve asks, quiet and calm.

Tony's eyes drift shut. "Both. The Stark mug has an inch of cold coffee, but the other one, the I <3 Robots mug is where I keep my wrenches that need extra cleaning. To the left is this board I'm working on. Don't tell Coulson, but SHIELD tech is pure shit. It's gonna be a surprise. Laptops for all the top dogs, good security, biometric scanners, field goodies."

"So good, just like this, keep going." So Tony keeps going and so long as he's talking, Steve's hand doesn't stop. When Tony pauses, Steve asks questions about the work. What it's for, when did Tony work on it, what's new about it, how does the tech function. Tony tells him, eyes shut and breathing slow and even, until finally, halfway through a long digression about the history of operating systems, he falls asleep.

*

Tony wakes up in his own bed, fully clothed except for his shoes. He feels remarkably relaxed, although his throat is a little sore from all the talking. Huh.

Captain Alpha's a gentleman. Who knew.

Tony smiles to himself, rolls over, goes back to sleep, feeling warm and oddly safe.

Chapter 42

That warm, fuzzy, *stupid* opinion lasts a mere deliriously *deluded* two fucking weeks.

Tony grits his teeth. Slams the door to his private upstairs loft bedroom. Goddamn fucking Captain *Asshole*.

Chapter 43

Steve stacks his folders carefully so that the highly classified ones are in the center. He carries the folders and a paper cup of what Coulson assures him is the best coffee in the world to the SHIELD meeting room. Steve hasn't made it through the entire stack of books that Stark gave him, but he's made it through enough that he thinks he has a handle on what's acceptable.

And what isn't.

Steve's been thinking a lot about the situation since the ugly incident with Senator Fromm. Tony's actions had saved that Senator's life. Steve's not sure what he'd have done to that man. Actually torn him limb from limb, maybe.

Afterward, Tony hadn't even brought up what Steve had done in the copter. Steve's had plenty of sweaty dreams about having Tony under his hands. His voice almost slurred in pleasure as he talked about operating systems and upgrades and let Steve hold him in his lap, while Steve breathed him in.

Things are better between them, Steve can tell. Tony isn't relaxed around him, because Tony isn't really relaxed around anyone who isn't another omega, but the tight wire of tension sings a little less sharply. Tony's verbal barbs are more fond and exasperated than pointed. Tony still sits alone in a large armchair, engine bits spread in his lap, tools to hand, during casual team meetings in Stark House, but he's been less fidgety.

All of it makes his other behavior all the more baffling.

Steve's not a modern guy. He knows that. He's made allowances. It's why he took his time to finish reading some more of the books, watching TV, reviewing websites. Tony's books are a little more liberal than the ones Fury's given him, but Steve is still sure he's accurately figured out *some* parts of modern life. He's even double-checked with his SHIELD modernity rep to be triple certain. This is important, and Steve does not want to get this wrong.

And the sole omega on a team should not be slipping off to back rooms at parties and then coming back looking touseled. Reeking of sex with multiple strangers.

The SHIELD reps assure Steve that Stark is out of line, is unusually promiscuous.

The unexpected meeting with Maria Hill is what pushes Steve to act. Hill is a professional, and she's Fury's right hand man. She's obviously not happy about having to talk to Steve privately, but she has a duty. It's set on the Hellicarrier, on a day when it's only Steve visiting.

The topic of the meeting is Tony.

From a dark gray SHIELD folder, Hill pulls several printouts from prominent online news sites. The articles are all recent, all reference the Avengers, all damning. Most have photos. Tony looking practically debauched as he leans against a wall at a charity gala, tie loose, eyes heavy lidded, mouth red. It's the misbuttoned shirt and wrinkled pants that appears to be the main topic of that little gossip piece.

There's another photo of Tony, wiping the edge of his mouth with his thumb, one eyebrow raised, that makes Steve's gut clench. Tony's dishevelled looks, reddened lips, and air of 'just got fucked' certainly do add to the picture. Steve knows Tony isn't wiping come from his mouth, but he only knows that because he rode home in the limo with him that night. No come on Tony's face, but Steve could smell it elsewhere. And not just one person's.

Despite the bad publicity, Steve thinks it's dirty pool of Hill to bring this up. Tony's a private citizen, and he makes his own decisions. Tony was Iron Man before the Avengers, and frankly, the Avengers need Tony (and Tony's money and Tony's brain and Tony's house and Tony's cars) more than Tony needs the Avengers.

But...Steve also is starting to get a little worried. Tony'd been doing better for a while. He'd looked better, he'd seemed to sleep better. Then he'd gone on some trip for a week, and ever since, he's been...off. Erratice. Acting out. Which sounds horrible, even to Steve's own mind, like Tony's a teenager. The sleeping around wouldn't bother Steve nearly so much if Tony didn't look so exhausted, didn't smell so weary, didn't seem as if he hated it, didn't smell of pain instead of pleasure.

Steve feels more than a little hypocritical as Hill explains how inappropriate Tony's behavior is, including some semi-public sex at a garden party of a prominent celebutante. As if Steve hadn't wanted to take Tony on the lawn at the Celebration of Heroes event.

TMZ ran the garden party story with a shot of Tony's (very muscled) naked butt framed by what looks like day lilies. The poll read, "I'd hit that y/n/you never know where it's been." Steve had quickly flipped past the print out before his hormones hit overdrive at the results. He had no illusions that nearly everyone would vote yes.

"One of the possible recommendations," Hill is saying, "is that we consider moving Stark to a less public facing position."

Because SHIELD can afford to do without Tony's relentless wheeling and dealing and schmoozing and paying? Steve's skepticism must have shown on his face, because Hill goes on, "Technically, Stark is placed as a consultant, and some feel that his strengths lie more in technology and research than in being on the field."

Steve flips the folder shut. Right. "Iron Man is part of the Avengers. He stays with the team."

"I understand your position, Captain," Hill says gravely, "but Na Stark has had a difficult life. He's prone to stress and overexertion and the bottom line is, we need to reel him in. For his sake, too. I'm with you--I think taking Iron Man off the field is a last resort. All I'm asking for you now is to talk to him. Try to get him to recognize what he's doing to the team

with this behavior. If you'd rather not speak to him about this, I understand. We can have someone else address it with him. One of the doctors or myself."

Steve doesn't like it, but he does understand it. Including the underlying threat of benching Tony, which, if they're looking to cut down on Stark's stress is really not the way to go. "Thank you for speaking with me, Agent Hill. I would appreciate it if you allowed me to be the one to speak to him."

"Of course, Captain."

Especially given Steve's reaction to Fromm, and Tony's willingness to....help, Steve thinks that he owes Tony the courtesy of explaining this not only privately but as carefully as possible.

He's set up Tony's meeting an hour before everyone else is getting there.

Steve has no intention of trying to tell Tony that he can't have other partners at all. That would be an overstep, no matter what Steve's dick says and no matter what the SHIELD doctors think. But discretion is not just old fashioned good manners, it's going to be important for team safety and, yes, their reputation. Tony appreciates blunt talk; he'll understand. He won't like it, Steve knows that, but he will understand it.

When he gets to their conference room, Steve finds it open. He arranges the chairs so that he's at the head, but he angles the chair to his left open in an inviting manner.

Steve wants, in his heart, to have this talk at home. It's easy to talk to Tony when he's curled up in his chair, fixing things, or over breakfast, or even down in the workshop where Tony's hideous music is an endless wail of drums beats and guitars.

But that's Tony's home, and this is a work matter. Tony has every right to do whatever he wants at home, including have as many orgies as he likes. So, Steve set the meeting at work, on neutral territory, as best he could.

It's only another minute before Tony blows in. His hair is wild, and he's wearing a worn tee shirt and black jeans. His eyes are tired, his face a little drawn, but he sniffs the air.

Steve holds out the coffee. "I brought a gift."

Tony grabs the coffee and holds it in both hands as he drinks. He looks like he's having a religious experience, and it makes Steve smile. "Should I leave you two alone for some privacy?" Steve asks. This will be easier if he can keep things light.

"Mmm," Tony says, and good grief, his eyes *are* heavy lidded with pleasure. "How the hell did you get Jamaican Blue Mountain on the Hellicarrier of all places?"

Steve yanks his brain out of his dick. He absolutely cannot find Tony, no *Stark*, this is work, he's Stark not Tony at work, attractive right now. It will not help their conversation. "Coulson."

"He is such a fanboy."

"I asked him to get me some coffee you'd like."

Tony's eyebrows shoot up, but if he finds it odd that the team leader is buttering him up, he's polite enough (for once) to not say so. Steve relaxes. This meeting is going to go just fine.

He gets up and shuts the door.

Tony puts down the coffee. Steve's surprised, but Tony must really have enjoyed it to finish it so quickly. "I wanted to talk to you, privately, just for a moment."

"Sure." Tony tips his head to one side. "I don't have the tweaks to your boots done yet. I'm waiting on a shipment of--"

"It's not that." Steve straightens his folders, reminds himself that he needs to do this for all of them. Tony may not like it, but he will understand it. And better Steve than one of the SHIELD doctors. "I've been tasked by Fury to work on team dynamics for the longterm. And I spoke with Agent Hill recently."

Tony doesn't say anything. He's intent, focused, and it's unnerving, because Tony usually does about seven different things at once, usually while talking. It's...unnerving to be the focus of that much concentrated silent Tony energy.

"I wanted to talk to you about the public appearances. Especially after the regrettable incident at the Washington party."

"Ah," Tony says. Which could mean anything, Steve knows.

"I still cannot tell you how much I appreciate you taking point there. It means a lot, that you would be willing to do that." Steve swallows. "I lost control, and you stepped in. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Tony doesn't look away, doesn't look down, just keeps looking directly at Steve. "But?"

"There's no but," Steve says, flustered. "It's just a genuine thank you."

Tony's complete stillness breaks as he tips one eyebrow up. "Then I can get up and wander the halls until the regular meeting starts."

"Well, no."

Tony nods slowly.

Steve swallows. OK, maybe he shouldn't have said there was no but. The damn leadership book Fury'd given him had said this was better, but Tony's smart. Well, nothing for it but to plough forward. "I wanted to talk to you about something else. In part because of the Washington incident."

Tony's expression doesn't change. Doesn't say anything.

"It's--in the interest of preventing further incidents," Steve says. Jesus, he's never seen Tony silent for so long. "And also because of the team's reputation, I'd like you to reconsider....some of your activities."

"My activities," Tony repeats, voice perfectly calm, giving nothing away.

"The promiscuity," Steve blurts out. "And the public sex. Look, Stark, you saved me back there. It means a lot. But you have to see how it looks. We're all in the public eye now, and we're all tied together, a team, do you see? What you did in the past was your business. It's not how I would--I mean, I don't think this is even good for you. As your leader, I'm worried about you. You could really get hurt by some of these one night stands. I'm not asking you to be completely celibate, but you can't just go around sleeping with a lot of random people at parties."

"You want me to quit fucking around, especially at parties."

Steve winces at the language. "It's not too much to ask, and like I said, I really do appreciate how much you've done for us. For me. But you cannot just keep on doing this. Did you know that woman you slept with at the FEMA event was *married*?" Steve shuts his eyes. "You know what, that last was out of line. I'm sorry."

Tony's just looking at him.

Steve realizes he's babbling now. "This isn't fun for me, either, you know. But as team leader, it's my job to keep an eye on my team's activities and, you know, help them. I received a complaint. I'm not just pulling this out of thin air, OK? Command is paying attention, the public is paying attention. Look, will you say something, please?"

"You want me, for the good of the team, to keep my pants zipped, because I'm making you look bad."

"No, not just--this isn't just about the team. I'm concerned for *you*." Steve puts all the earnestness he can into his voice, because he needs Tony to know that he means it. Tony is ill and stressed and under the weather, and he often looks much worse after these bouts of sex.

"I'm getting that part, yes," Tony says. "Is that all?"

Steve sits back, frustrated. He reminds himself that he isn't here to punish Tony. Tony hasn't done anything wrong. It's rude and not great PR, but it's hardly illegal. "I also think it will improve the Avengers image. You know that it's crucial to the rebuilding efforts. If you could just keep down the flirting and the casual sex stuff. That's all I'm asking."

"Actually, Captain, I meant, aside from telling me to behave, is there anything you needed to speak to me about."

"Oh. Well, no." Steve tries a shy smile. "Just to say thank you."

Tony looks at him for another unreadable moment. "Then I need to finish a project for Coulson. I'll be back in time for the meeting."

"Tony, I hope you understand that I'm not angry. I just need you to understand some things."

Tony slides his chair back, stands. "You were admirably clear, Captain." And then he's out the door.

Steve rocks back in his chair and plays with his pen. Tony's left the door open, but Steve isn't sure where he went. He hopes Tony will be back in time for the meeting, the way he said he would, but if Tony is working on a project for Coulson, maybe not. Steve will get things set, anyway.

He puts a fresh pre-briefing folder at Tony's spot first. Steve picks up the paper coffee cup and frowns. It's over half full. He looks at the door.

Uh-oh.

Maybe that hadn't gone as well as he'd thought.

Chapter 44

Two days later, Steve knows it hadn't gone as well as he'd thought.

Steve's hand grips the doorframe of the General's private drawing room. He can hear the wood creak under the pressure of his fingers.

Tony Stark is chest down on the mahogany desk. His hair, longer than ever, is falling into his eyes. His mouth is damp, lips parted, panting. His gorgeous broad-fingered hands are splayed on the dark wood.

His eyes have just opened, half-lidded, but sharp.

Slowly Tony smiles, blows Steve a kiss.

Behind him, General Lee is pounding into him for all he's worth. Grunting, eyes closed, clearly completely lost in the glory of fucking Tony Stark on a mahogany desk of strategic maps. Steve can't really blame the man.

Right before Steve can turn to go, Tony winks.

Steve stalks away, shaking.

*

It happens again at Deborah Weymouth's party. Steve's supposed to be 'networking' with these rich folks. It's a favor to Fury and the Army, because a veteran's affairs bill is going to the Senate soon.

The importance of the purpose and the relatively small size (only 20 guests) made Steve believe it would be a good chance for the team to attend together. Surely not even Tony can get up to trouble with only twenty conservative guests invited.

How could he have been so stupid?

This time, when Steve opens the door to what he'd been told was the bathroom (by a waiter, goddammit, Tony had gotten to them all), he finds a new scene.

Tony's on his knees, angled perfectly towards the door so that Steve has a crystal clear side-view. Mr O'Connell is fucking Tony's mouth. Tony's eyes are closed, and his cheeks are hollowed. Steve can see the dick slide in with each thrust.

There's spit on Tony's chin, and the damn banker's hands are buried in Tony's hair holding his head still. Tony isn't moving at all, and Steve's impressed despite himself.

O'Connell's large and long. He pulls almost all the way out, then thrusts in, and Tony offers no resistance. The cock disappears entirely, and Steve realizes that the damn man must

literally be fucking Tony's throat, because at the end of each thrust is a faint gasp of choked off air. But still no protest.

O'Connell's grip changes slightly, his speed picks up. He's making a desperate sort of noise, and then he's jammed down Tony's throat, coming.

Tony makes not a sound, not even when the man pulls out frantically and finishes by stripping his cock to spurt on Tony's still-open mouth and face.

Steve is breathing hard, and he doesn't know the last time he has ever been so angry.

Slowly, Tony's eyes open. They're dark brown, and Steve loves to look at them. Tony's eyes have always been beautifully expressive. Now, they glitter with anger every bit as deep as Steve's.

Their gazes meet.

It's not Tony who looks away first.

*

The fourth time, Tony is on a table, being energetically ridden by a woman whose name neither of them probably remember. Steve is starting to admit to himself that maybe he made a colossal mistake.

The couple are fucking on a table that once held knickknacks. Small ashtrays and a vase of flowers litter the floor. Tony's balanced perfectly, holding her hips as she fucks him, his feet braced on the table so he doesn't even slide around.

Just like the other times, Tony's obviously waiting for Steve's entrance. Steve catches sight of himself in the mirror across the room. Tony's watching the mirror, and when he sees Steve, he does a slow backbend off the table until he's hanging half-off.

How the heck he's managing it, Steve has no idea, but good grief. Tony's looking at him upside down, eyes bright, chest covered in bite marks, nail scratches, and some woman's cologne, surrounding the arc reactor that's like a jewel in his chest.

Steve hisses through his teeth, a sharp angry sound, and Tony raises one eyebrow at him, still upside down.

The damn man doesn't even look out of breath.

Steve whirls on his heel, leaves.

Not just the room, but the party.

Fucking *hell*.

*

It takes Steve three days, sixteen punching bags, and a good long run before he calms down enough to talk to Stark.

OK, so maybe he hadn't phrased himself well. Maybe he'd blindsided Stark. Maybe he'd overstepped a little.

Steve asks Jarvis whether he's working on anything crucial: no. Steve makes his way to the workshop. He's not going to tell Stark this, but he's dressed carefully for this mission. Plain workshirt in soft blue plaid, khaki chinos, simple brown workboots. He wants to appear confident, not cowed, but not aggressive either.

Steve knows how to pick a fight. He hopes he's getting better at defusing one.

He finds Stark in his workshop, shirtless except for a black undershirt, heavy black overalls tied at his waist, and steel capped boots. He's forging something, and it's strikingly beautiful to watch his sculpted arms rise and fall, bringing the hammer down again and again in precise strokes on hot metal.

After a moment, Stark tosses the hammer onto a table. "What can I do for you, Captain?"

Jarvis hadn't said a word, because Steve had asked him not to. How did Stark know he was there, smell? The whole place smells like a forge. Steve can move very quietly when he wants to, and Stark had seemed so focused on his work.

"I wanted to talk to you."

Stark picks up a tool, measures something on his still hot metal, puts it back. He shoots Steve an unreadable look. "About?"

Steve's jaw works, trying not to clench his teeth into a headache. Again. "About our meeting a two weeks ago."

"Pretty sure you said your piece, Rogers."

"And now you're *saying* yours?" Steve snaps. No. Be calm, be calm, be calm. Do not let Stark provoke you.

"If you like." Stark tosses the metal piece into a box of sand to cool it. He moves like a craftsman, utterly at home here. Like the whole workshop will move around him, flowing to meet him. Sometimes it does.

Steve shuts his eyes tight. "I'm sorry that I was not as tactful as I should have been when I brought up the subject. I was just trying to--" He stops.

"Tell me how to behave properly. For my own good. Yes, Captain, you were quite tactful." Stark picks up a long pair of tongs, removes a cherry-red and white glowing chunk of metal from the coals. "Unless you have anything to add, I have work."

Steve runs his hands through his hair. God damn Tony Stark. "Look. Could you stop doing what you've been doing?"

"Why?" Stark tilts the piece of metal back and forth. His voice is utterly calm.

"Because I'm not sure my blood pressure could take it if you blow the President on national TV."

Stark raises an eyebrow, but he's almost smiling. "Not really my type. But I'll take it under advisement, as a special request, since you asked."

"I did not ask!" Steve throws his hands up in the air.

"I was kidding, actually." Stark moves the hot metal to his forge. "Unless there's anything else, I've got hot iron here."

"Will you please just talk to me about this?"

Stark shoves the metal back into his coals. He's not stripping off his gloves, but he is coming closer. "So?"

"Look," Steve says, "I realize I wasn't as clear as I could be."

"Uh-huh." Stark picks up an awl and twirls it in his fingers, back and forth. "You want me to behave. For my very own good. Be a good boy. That about the size of it?"

"Not just for you. But partly. It's important for the team. It's important for our image."

"Sweetheart, after my How To videos, nobody's going to be shocked by a little fucking."

"What How To videos?" Steve asks, thrown.

"You really didn't check the YouPorn links, I sent," Stark says, amused. "Never mind. But my reputation's been cemented for years, gorgeous. You're just going to have to cope."

Steve leans forward, slams both his hands down flat on the worktable. "That's just it. You really have no idea what you're dealing with, here."

"Pretty sure I do." Stark just looks at him. "Better than you."

Steve's letting off way too many pheromones. He'd gotten perilously close to true Fight again last time. Tony had been wearing one of those metal gags, and he'd been shirtless, wearing nothing but buttery soft jeans and boots. Hands clasped behind his back, kneeling perfectly as some Army moron had fucked his mouth. There was enough evidence on Tony's face and chest that Steve knew the man fucking Tony's mouth hadn't been the first. Even remembering it infuriates Steve.

Steve's fingers grip the table, so hard he feels the wood give. "You really have no idea what I'm capable of. I do not want to hurt you. I'm good at control, but you have to stop pushing. It's not...safe."

Stark doesn't retreat the way Steve expected. "Are you *threatening* me, Captain? Going to do something naughty to me if I don't behave for you?"

Steve grits his teeth. God damn Stark.

"Because it sure sounds like a threat, gorgeous. But let me set your mind at ease." Stark cocks his hip and rests against the workbench, arms not even crossed, completely relaxed. "There is not one single thing you could do to me that hasn't been done. Many times before. You're safe."

Steve looks up. Stark's sweaty, and his eyes are still tired, but they have the same liveliness that Steve's always helplessly drawn to. Stark smells of iron and ore, flame and coal, but under it, there's a deep note. Like granite.

Steve's eyes narrow, because he can't smell *any* fear. No fear, no arousal. Just iron and flame and granite. Stark is not playing, is not joking, is just stating a plain fact. Sincere.

Steve's fingers loosen and very deliberately, he lowers his gaze, turns his head, bares his jaw. It's hard, but he softens his shoulders, spreads his hands carefully to his sides. Loosens his whole body and slowly, carefully, turns so his back is openly displayed to Stark as he leaves Stark's workshop, as completely submissive as he knows how to make himself.

When Steve gets to his own room, his hands are shaking.

He lays down, rolls over, buries his face in the pillow. No one can twist him up like Tony Stark.

Chapter 45

Steve stays away from Stark for a full week. He needs to get himself straightened out. Steve finishes some more of the books that Stark gave him. He also checks out the videos Stark mentioned.

They make Steve's jaw drop.

In them, Stark's not the Iron Man that Steve is used to or even the competent engineer who makes them all breakfast. He looks younger. A lot younger. The first is a reporter asking Tony about his rep. "Some say you're the finest lay in the western world."

Tony's smiling. "Only the western world? I'll need to up my game."

The reporter laughs. "I think we'd all enjoy that. What's your secret?"

Tony looks directly in the camera, winks. "No gag reflex."

"Really. I heard you can take--well."

"Sure. I can also tie a cherry stem in a knot. Did you want a public demonstration?" And oh god, Steve knows that expression. He sees it whenever Tony's face plate is up. One half second before he dives off a platform to fall into the endless sky.

Steve's not at all surprised the way Tony banters with the reporter and is somehow edging into the reporter's personal space, until he's in the reporter's lap, kissing him, then sliding down and down and down, and pretty soon Tony's giving a practical demonstration of deep throating techniques. When the reporter comes off in about two seconds, Tony pouts beautifully, eyes sharp as knives.

Steve's also not surprised when Tony convinces someone else to volunteer to 'help out'.

He has to shut the video off after only twenty minutes. His dreams are sweaty enough without additional video evidence, thank you. Besides, he's already seen Tony do some of those tricks in person.

Tony's obviously been practicing since those days. He's even more beautifully skilled now.

Steve wishes he wasn't so damn good at it.

*

Steve catches Tony in the kitchen, where he's staring at the coffeemaker like it's holding the great mysteries of the universe. Or like a cat at a mouse hole. The coffee is slowly dripping into the pot, and Tony is practically vibrating at every tiny drip.

It's kind of cute, if anything about Tony could possibly be cute.

Steve yanks his head back into the game. "Stark. I--"

Tony makes a sound like a cranky growl.

"Right. No coffee yet." Steve gets him a mug, pours in some milk, gets it all set. Tony's not always very good at thinking the steps out in order. As soon as there's an inch in the pot, Steve pours it, hands it over.

Tony drinks two-handed again, like a little kid. Steve's seen hardened battle officers do it when they're exhausted, but Tony really does look more like a kid who isn't very good at holding cups yet.

"What?" It's not impolite, per se, especially not for early-morning Tony.

Of course, it's two in the afternoon, but Steve is willing to make allowances. Tony had worked on a big secret project for Fury. He's probably just gotten up.

"What, Rogers?"

So cranky. "How about some toast?" Steve offers. Tony's lost weight again, and Steve knows he can't really afford to.

Tony just grunts, face hidden. Steve takes it as a yes.

"I think I've figured it out," Steve says, conversationally, when the toast is done.

"What?" Tony takes it and eats in tiny, precise bites. Surprisingly tidy, although Steve remembers he went to some fancy school. Maybe they learned manners. It's too bad he can't send Barton there.

"What you were doing, with me, and the--you know. Illustrative information."

Tony's on the second slice of toast. "Yeah? If you're going to enlighten me, fine, but move away from that pot first, will you? I need that."

Steve sighs. So much for his ploy to block it to keep down Tony's caffeine intake. "You're a weapon."

"What?"

"Your body." Steve sips his own small cup. (He's not stupid enough to steal the rest of the pot, but it had smelled good.) "You use it like a weapon."

"Well, duh."

So very cranky. It is adorable. "Not Iron Man. Your, the sex, the reputation." Steve waves his hand, sips his coffee, watching Tony carefully.

Tony finishes the last of the toast. "Yep."

"You're not going to argue?"

"Why? It's the truth."

"It doesn't bother you?" Steve asks, trying to figure out the next part of the puzzle.

"Wouldn't matter if it did." Tony pours the rest of the coffee into his own cup.

"Hmm," Steve says. "If I admit I was wrong, will you stop providing me with public demonstrations?"

"Do you know what you were wrong about?" Tony asks, looking at him at last. He's got a sleep crease on his cheek and his eyes are bloodshot.

"I was hoping you'd accept a global apology," Steve admits. He's got some ideas, but if he voices them, it could knock everything for a loop again.

Tony just grunts. "I'll take it under advisement." He pats Steve on the shoulder as he leaves the kitchen. "But no promises. I had fun making you blush."

Steve shuts his eyes tight, sighs. He hates the fact that he's blushing right now.

Chapter 46

Tony's a little surprised at how quickly he gets Captain America to retreat, but maybe he shouldn't be. The delightful little icicle is curiously old fashioned about some topics and oddly modern about others. Tony's still got the Captain's list of follow-up questions (written in perfect cursive script) about types in the modern age. If he wants to look at it from time to time, there's no real harm.

The damn work to get the world set back to rights is taking a lot of Tony's time, and in between, he keeps feeling like shit.

His dreams are a lot worse, and he often wakes up in the private loft, heart going a mile minute, while Jarvis's soothing voice recounts his exact longitude and latitude, again and again, until Tony slumps back against the sheets, sweaty and shaking.

Tony asks Na Anderson's personal friend for some under the counter drugs to help him out, but she sighs heavily and goes into a depressing spiel about the side effects of modern psych drugs on omega physiology. The tranq he took years ago has been taken off the market. It's not the only one.

Sometimes, Tony falls asleep in his private workshop. The bots cluster around him like an odd herd of musk-ox. Tony finds it comforting, but he'd take a repulsor blast to the chest before admitting anything.

When Tony stumbles into the common kitchen at 3 in the afternoon, Captain fucking America looks up, startled, like Tony's turned into an alien. Tony looks down at himself, just in case. Fly zipped, yes. Wearing clothes, yes.

"Tony, you look terrible."

"I'm fine."

Steven won't accept that, though. He has to go and ask Jarvis what's wrong, and because Jarvis is an annoying nosey interfering prick, Jarvis answers.

"I regret to inform you, Captain Rogers, that Sir's body temperature is elevated, his blood pressure has been cycling again, and he has not been able to keep down solid food since Tuesday."

"But it's Thursday," Steve says, like someone just did something horrible. Like burn a war bond.

"Indeed, Captain. Sir has been drinking an electrolyte solution, juice, and clear broth."

"I'm fine," Tony mutters, making for the coffee machine. He's actually come down here to get some toast, but he sure as hell isn't going to now.

But suddenly, Steve is right there, like he levitated in front of Tony's nose. Tony blinks at his chest. "That is some fucking fugly plaid you're working. Can't you let those damn things go?"

He lays his hand against Tony's forehead. Tony twists away, but Steve just moves with it. "Hey, it's OK. It's just me, Tony, come on, hold still."

Tony keeps up a grumbling rant about the wrongness of fucking 50s era madras, probably made in fucking child-labor sweatshops in fucking China knowing Fury. If he's quit struggling, it's just because he's humoring the big embarrassing jerk. That's all.

"Very high temperature. Jarvis?"

"101.9, Captain."

"Traitor." Tony tries to paw at the cabinet for where the mugs live, but the damn Captain is in the way.

"OK, Tony, I'm taking you to bed."

"You only get one shot to tumble me, and you're gonna do it now?"

Steve just sighs. He's asking Jarvis if he can have temporary access to the private penthouse floor, just this once.

"No, you cannot, and if you betray me on this J--"

"I would not betray you on this, Sir," Jarvis says gently.

Fuck, Tony is slipping. He's whining. He hates when he whines.

"Captain, I would recommend taking Sir to his public bedroom on the eleventh floor. He will rest well there, and regrettable as you may find it, the stress of having another person in his private space far outweighs any possible benefit to his familiar surroundings."

"Really?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I don't think that's safe."

Tony shoves at Steve's chest. "Christ, you're annoying."

Steve takes his hands in one big one of his. "Stark. You're not well. We'll take you to your public bedroom this time, but we need to talk about the fact that you normally stay in a room that no one else has access to. I'd been under the impression that rule would be overridden in case of emergency."

"This isn't an emergency," Tony says. Now his head really hurts, and the stomach cramps are getting worse. He lets himself sink against Rogers' big wide chest, and predictably, Rogers'

grip loosens. Tony waits, then slips free.

"Tony!"

"This isn't an emergency." Tony's backed away three feet. He's squinting against the bright lights. "I know exactly what's wrong, and in three days, I'll be fine."

"Even so, I just think someone needs to be able to check on you."

"*Someone* can. You can't." Tony just feels like two miles of bad road. It's tactless and it's not how he'd have put it normally, because he isn't always an asshole and he knows Rogers gets soppy and sentimental about his team.

"You let Barton have access? Romanoff?"

Oh hell, Rogers isn't even pissed. He's hurt. Christ. Tony wipes his sweaty face with shirt sleeve. "God no. Someone else. It's not *personal*, Steve. Look, I don't feel good."

"Who?" Steve's eyes are narrowed, sharp and tight, and he smells possessive again.

Tony gives up on this whole escaping thing and lets himself slide down to the floor, back against the frig. "No one you know, OK? It's not another alpha, so get your panties under control."

Steve's eyes widen, then he smiles. It's soft, surprisingly sweet. "Not a beta, either."

Tony doesn't answer. "I want some toast, Rogers." He points at the toaster. "For Christ's sake, will you shut up and get me something to eat?"

"Sure, Tony."

*

On the fourth day, Tony comes back out. He doesn't feel great, but he does feel better. It's got to be enough, because apparently every supervillianous jerk in the Northern hemisphere is having a party on the Eastern seaboard. All Avengers invited.

They fight. They defeat the villains.

If Tony can barely stand when he gets out of the suit's supportive mechanical grip, he's smart enough to do it where no one else can see.

*

"It was a premature half-heat, wasn't it?"

Oh fuck. Tony rolls his eyes. He's about ready to turn right around and walk back out of the common room, but he can smell pizza. Fresh, good, New York pizza. It's the day after the latest mission, and Tony's feeling well enough to actually eat.

"You again? I'm fine. Temperature normal, all vitals fine, not even one scrape that needs your nosey nose. OK?"

Steve opens the box and offers it to Tony, holding it open so he's not actually handing it over. Tony eyes him, grabs a single slice. "What now?"

"Can't I order pizza as a thank you for killing three giant furry things?"

"Mutant wombats. And no, you can't. Spill or I'm leaving."

Rogers's shoulder slump. It's so easy to manipulate him, but it's like Tony can't help himself. Also, the pizza is really good.

"I read up about it. In those books you lent me. It's serious, especially at your age."

"A girl always likes to know a handsome fella thinks she's over the hill," Tony says, cramming the rest of the slice in his mouth in one go. Aw, dammit, Steve is closing his eyes. Spoilsport.

"I meant, in the middle of your child bearing years," Steve says.

"Uh huh. Are you going to eat that?"

"No," Steve says, resigned. Tony takes another slice. "This is the reason you've been looking so ill all the time, isn't it?"

There's really no point in denying it. Tony shrugs. Steve will just keep fishing until he finds out. He's not as easy to snow as Rhodey and Pep had been about the palladium. Steve's got a surprisingly cynical bent when he wants to. Maybe it's Tony's positive influence.

"We're going to handle this," Steve says. "Tony, you're not alone anymore. I've got a call into a SHIELD specialist."

"Kind of stalker-level creepy, Captain."

"It's the same thing I'd do for any member of my team."

"Then let me run right through HIPAA and give you the low down."

"I would appreciate that. Thank you."

"The reason I'm having trouble is that omega bodies are high strung. I come from a healthy line, but the palladium took its toll. I've got heavy metal poisoning, and my heats are no longer stable. I'm not doing anything about it, not because I'm a self-destructive idiot, but because there is nothing to be done."

"That's not what the research I've been reading suggests."

Tony's stomach pitches and rolls. He sets the second half of his slice back on the box. Tony looks up and meets Steve's eyes. "If you're thinking about a bond, forget it."

Steve frowns. "But--"

"I'm not being a brat." Tony's smile is bitter, fast, sharp. "I can't. I was raped when I was twenty. Being unable to bond is a common side effect. Thanks for the pizza."

He turns and walks back out.

Chapter 47

Steve would normally ask Coulson, who is always happy to help, but this is too important. He goes straight to Fury.

"What can I do for you, Captain?"

Fury's office is utilitarian, plain, nearly empty. There's tech around, but it's all blank. Steve expected nothing less. There's not even a potted plant.

"It's about Stark."

Fury just waits.

Steve knows this isn't going to be easy. Steve is an alpha's alpha, and he respects Fury. But Tony, however much Tony does not want to be--Tony belongs to Steve. That's what Steve's heart says. So speaking of any hurt, any weakness, of Tony's is hard. "He's ill."

"Palladium poisoning, yes." Fury sits back in his chair. "We got him something to help control the symptoms, and he's replaced the core of his arc reactor. But it had side effects. Coulson tells me that Stark's been having some false half-heats. Is that right?"

Steve tucks his hands between his knees and hunches over. He's grateful to Coulson, again, for making this easier. "Yes."

"I don't think there's much that can be done, medically." Fury's voice is quiet. "I've had his medical files hacked."

Steve looks up, meets the Director's dark gaze. "He told me that he can't--" Steve lets out a harsh breath. "That he can't bond. Because of what happened to him when he was young."

"That's what his medical files have said." Fury leans forward a little. "Are you asking why it wasn't in the file I gave you?"

Steve can't speak. He just nods.

"I've been accused of expediency, many times. And there *are* things I'm willing to do, places I'm willing to go, lies I'm willing to tell."

Steve just waits.

"I didn't put that information in there for two reasons. One, he was very young. No matter what you may think of my methods, I don't betray my people if I can help it. I thought he deserved some privacy. Two, it was a particularly brutal business." Fury looks away, at the wall, then back. "I would encourage you to be very careful, Captain, on this topic. Not just with Stark, though the good lord knows he could use some care about this, but for yourself."

Steve leans forward, then stills. "You think I would--"

Fury shrugs. "I would. If he was mine."

Steve gets up, goes to the door. At the last minute, he turns. "Why didn't anyone?"

"I don't believe I said no one did. One of the reasons I recommend you not look too deep into that time is that there's nothing you can do about it. Not anymore. It was all handled, years ago."

"Who handled it?"

Fury laughs, baring all his teeth. He must be able to smell the possessive pheromones Steve's pouring into the room. "I don't think you know Stark nearly as well as you think you do, Captain. He's a little like Russia."

"Russia?"

"A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. Just when you think you know him, he'll surprise you."

*

Steve takes it for what it is: advice. He goes to Natasha.

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Steve gets back to Stark House, Tony's sprawled in his favorite arm chair. There's a chamois cloth full of gears and wire and mechanical things in his lap, tiny screwdrivers on the chair arm, vials of oil scattered around his feet.

Steve stands there for a long time, just watching the slow rise and fall of Tony's chest, the faint hum of the reactor a soothing counter point, the blue light sweet and dim through the dark cotton of his shirt.

Steve can see the ghost of the beautiful young man he'd just spent hours looking at. The messy bangs that curl over his face. The slight up-tilt of his nose, the perfect jaw. The line of shoulders is different now--harder. There are more scars on his hands, Steve's sure, but it's Tony's wrists he's looking at. Spying on, while Tony's asleep.

The left one's hidden by the chamois, but the right one is curled close enough to the soft blue glow. Steve can see them, like rain drops on the olive skin, circled around the broad fine bones of that wrist, scars fine as mist, a bracelet of pain Stark often hides with jewelry or watches.

The left one is worse, Steve is sure. Natasha had let him read the EMT report. There's some nerve damage, even now, she said. Minor, but irritating to a crafstman like Stark. He'd pulled so hard the restraints had ripped the skin, torn deep into the muscle. Caught, like an animal in a trap.

There's nothing to see of Tony's ankles--they're hidden in heavy Carhartt boots, steel toed, covered further by the ends of his dark jeans. There would be scars there, too. Top of the foot, bone of the ankle, where that bright boy he'd been had been caught, hung.

Steve steps even closer, knows he shouldn't. Can't help it.

Tony's head is tipped back.

Steve has to move a little to see. Tony's goatee is neatly trimmed today, and he must have shaved recently because there's no five o'clock shadow. Near the join of jaw and throat, at the bottom of the ear, is Steve's favorite place. He loves the way the scent glands rise to the surface during arousal, loves the way the skin warms during sex. He'd like to nip there, tease with teeth and tongue.

When he'd had a lapful of Stark in that helicopter, Steve had taken shameless advantage. He'd stroked his neck, breathed deep, caressed the fine hairs at the back of Tony's neck, but Steve had also given in to his own deepest desires, and he'd given that place a slow gentle kiss, while Tony was deep under, cradled in his arms, boneless, trusting, asleep.

Steve had felt it then, the faint tracery, the odd ridges. He'd wondered, but he'd been distracted by Tony's weight, the smell of him, the adrenaline's crash sliding down out of his system to be replaced by a fierce and dark protectiveness.

Here, in the faint light of the arc reactor, it's easier to see. The blue makes the shine of scar tissue stand out against the olive warm skin.

Steve's hands slowly clench into fists. They're scars. Fine, neat, anatomically perfect lines over the scent glands where bonds are usually cemented, where an alpha's heavier musk can sink in.

Someone took that. Sliced it out, changed it, took that away. It makes Steve want to tip his head back and scream.

Between one breath and the next, Tony's eyes open. He's looking right at Steve, who is still crouched way too close, staring unabashedly, right in his space.

And no wonder Tony has his own damn floor. No wonder Steve isn't allowed in. It's a wonder anyone is.

Tony's just looking at him. "You've been busy, Steven."

It's a jolt, as it always is. No one calls him that, not here, not in this world. No one except Tony.

"Yes," Steve says.

"Someone telling tales of me, gorgeous?"

"Yes." Why lie? Tony must be able to see it. Steve wonders what his own face looks like. Wonders what it must take for Tony to just lay there, head tipped back, throat bared, while Steve stares at him.

"Did you find out what you needed to know?"

"No." Steve is still looking at him, and his gaze drops to the scars at his neck again.

"Don't go tilting at windmills for me, Steven. I don't care for it."

"Natasha tells me someone already did."

"I wouldn't like *you* to do it."

"Because of what I am." Steve is certain of it. Whoever had killed all those seventeen men and women present at that party had been thorough about it. Thorough and very creative.

"No." Tony runs a hand through his hair, messing it further. He sits up, and it's a relief, in a way. "Because it's over."

"Is it?" Steve moves very slowly, careful to stop if Tony doesn't like it. The tips of his fingers ghost over Tony's jaw, down to the join at the neck, over the delicate skin, a very intent gentle caress.

To his surprise, Tony immediately tips his head back, eyes soft, lets him touch, explore. "Jesus, you are not a subtle man."

"It doesn't seem to bother you," Steve observes, running the pad of his finger over the sensitive skin, tracing scars.

Tony makes a quiet little noise, half-stifled.

Steve's surprised to realize it's a sex noise. "You like this," Steve says. He's certain of it.

Tony's eyes are dark. "It bothers you that I do, huh."

"I'm not sure what to make of it. I don't like that they did this."

Tony turns his head fast, and he's got Steve's fingers in his mouth. He's sucking in a slow, langorous way that makes Steve way too hard way too fast. Right against Steve's fingers, he murmurs, "And I fucking love it."

Steve shuts his eyes, because that voice. "You just love to push, don't you."

"Noticed that, did you." Tony's mouth is edging up Steve's hand, he's sucking more of Steve's fingers, circling each one with his tongue when they're in his mouth.

"Yeah, kind of." Steve is having a very hard time keeping track of this conversation.

"You smell very angry, Steven." It's Tony's most dangerous voice, quiet, not brash. Calm.

Steve pulls his fingers out of Tony's mouth, but he can't resist rubbing his wet thumb against Tony's bottom lip. When Tony nips it, Steve flinches. It doesn't hurt, it's just a reminder. Talk to me. "I am, yes. Very angry."

"Why?" Tony turns a little and Steve watches the scars on his neck shimmer in the dim light.

"They hurt you."

Tony nips absently at Steve's fingers, like he's just enjoying the taste of them. Or maybe he's playing. "How chivalrous."

"Fury didn't tell me."

"Holds his cards for when he needs them." Tony's nipped his way down Steve's hand, and now he's nuzzling the pulse at Steve's wrist.

Steve remembers blood, scattered on colored pasteboard, tossed down on glass, knows exactly what Tony means. Understands the warning in it. "Yes." He's not as cynical as

Tony, but maybe Tony has the right to be as harsh as he is.

Tony turns, and now his face is in profile. Steve watches as Tony slides two of Steve's fingers into his mouth again, sucks them inside, does the tongue trick. Watches Tony's eyes dance at the reaction Steve must be giving him.

"I really can't think when you do that," Steve points out.

"I know. Why do you think I like it so much?" Tony turns back, tips his head back, throat completely bared. It's erotic and powerful and Steve wants exactly what he's offering. How many times has Tony done this, how many times has he judged his mark's responses, shifted his own to match, pushed buttons and pulled strings until he gets what he wants, using the weapon he's got?

Steve's breath is loud. He has to fight to keep still. He's on the edge of losing control, and he won't let himself. It's his own fault he came here, and he will not use himself against Tony. Especially because Tony so obviously expects him to.

Tony's giving off enough of his own aroused pheromones to choke the air. Steve can see the line of Tony's cock against the seam of his jeans, can smell, faintly, the musk of it, and the sweetness of something else. Tony's not just hard, he's wet, too.

While Steve's gaze is focused on Tony's lap, Tony slides his left hand over Steve's forearm, talented fingers dancing over the muscles like he's examining a bar of metal. His manicured nails are just long enough to scrape.

Steve looks up again, caught staring. Tony's watching him, gaze intent. "What did you want to ask me, Steven?"

"You keep calling me that."

"Maybe I like it." Tony licks down the scrapes he made until he comes to Steve's palm, and the bristles of his goatee are curiously soft. He nips the big muscle at the base of Steve's thumb.

Steve's feeling way too exposed here. In over his head. Natasha had warned him. Hell, *Fury* had warned him.

"No one calls me that here." Steve is shocked at his own voice. It gives too much away. Sad, wistful, still angry. Hurt.

Tony doesn't look smug. He looks just the same, like a banked fire, and he's still giving off heat. His teeth are bright white when he grabs Steve's thumb, pulls it into his mouth with a soft sound. He sucks until his cheeks hollow, and his eyes darken.

Steve knows his own breath is hitching and uneven, because Jesus, Tony. "Don't promise more than you can deliver."

"I always deliver." Tony lets Steve's thumb go again, raises his head a little. "Steven. Ask me what you want to know."

"Who killed them?" Steve asks.

And of course, it's so simple.

"I did," Tony says, and he's pulling Steve's thumb back into his mouth, sucking gently.

"*Jesus.*" Of course he had. Steve pulls his hand back, and Tony lets him. Tony's still sprawled in his favorite chair, langourous, cool, calm, watching Steve with hooded eyes. Covered in soft blue light, even in the dark.

Steve gets up, backs away, turns, runs.

Tony's quiet "Goodnight, Steven," follows him all the way to his room.

*

That night, Steve has restless dreams. He fights battles. He rolls to the earth, and it smells like ore and rock. He throws the shield, and it comes back, smeared with blood. He is thrown into the water, and covered in ice. But above him, he can see the bubbles, and they're blue-white, circles shining in the blackness. Giving him light.

*

Natasha had shown him the files. Her look had been cool. "Be prepared," she'd said.

"I've been to war," Steve said.

"Not this kind."

No. Not this kind.

At least, not outside the camps.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said that Fromm showed Steve a very *mild* picture from that marriage (early in the proceedings, etc). Steve still understood, from that context, that it was going wrong, but he did not know the full extent of what happened. Hope that's clear. Before, he had a hint, now he finally knows the extent of it.

Chapter 49

Steve shouldn't be surprised, but Tony's the same as he's always been the next day. He's scowling moodily at the coffee maker as it hisses and spits.

No one else is around. Natasha's out and about, prepping for her next assignment, Coulson and Barton are still in India.

"I'm not sure what happened yesterday," Steve says. He hadn't meant to say it out loud, but he's caught a glimpse of Tony's bare feet. There's a sprinkling of pale skin at the edge of his pajama pants. Scars.

"Christ," he hears Tony mutter at the coffee. Then he's digging in the cupboards. Poking in the freezer. He works for a minute, while Steve's silent, wishing he could take the words back.

When Tony turns, he has a large bowl that they sometimes use for Asian noodle soups. It's currently filled with ice cream in pint-shaped mounds. There's a gooey dark mess poured on top, and two cherries. "This is the best I've got at this hour. If you want whipped cream, you're shit out of luck. Pepper ate it all."

"I--what is this?"

"New York Superfudge Chunk, Chunky Money, Cherry Garcia, Karamel Sutra, and, I don't know. Americone Dream? Not sure." He sticks a spoon in it and shoves it at Steve.

Steve stares at the bowl. "You're giving me ice cream."

"It's an ice cream sundae, Rogers. They had them in the 40s in the soda shops."

"Last night you called me Steven."

Tony huffs out a laugh. "You should have seen your face." He doesn't seem angry or upset, or even cruel, just amused.

Steve pokes warily at the huge amount of ice cream doused under sticky nearly-black fudge sauce. The ice cream is much harder than it looks. Dense, like real ice cream from his time, and full of all kinds of random things. "It's good."

"Of course. Would I buy subpar ice cream?" Tony sounds vaguely insulted.

"No, you wouldn't." Steve has another few bites. He's kind of embarrassed to admit that it's making him feel better. "That's a very omega thing to do."

Tony's spine goes straighter. He pours a mug of coffee for himself. "*Everyone* likes ice cream."

"Sucking on my fingers like a lollipop isn't an everyone thing, though." Steve sucks on the spoon, just because. Too bad Tony's immune to that kind of thing. He just looks amused.

"You're a hard core alpha, aren't you?"

Apparently they are talking about this. "Probably. But how did you mean?"

"You don't have a gender preference." Tony knocks back coffee. "You just prefer omegas. Sexually."

Steve feels the blush rise in his cheeks. "I--yes." They've talked about this before, but Steve still finds it painful, strange, to discuss this at all, much less in a brightly lit kitchen in the middle of the afternoon.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Rogers. The hard line alphas all do. They only marry beta tail to cement alliances, shit like that. Ninety percent of the time, the hard liners are attracted strictly to Os. Most can't even get it up with the other types and don't bother trying."

Tony always has to put things in such crude terms. Steve gets it, but jeez. "What about you?"

"What about me?" Tony has already finished his first coffee. He's pouring more.

"What's your sexual preference?"

Tony pours cream into the mug. Not that pansy half-n-half, but heavy whipping cream. Good. Tony can use the calories. "Oh that. When I get a choice...." He shrugs.

"Spit it out, Stark."

"Statistically, I've tended to sleep with moderately dominant women and omegas of any gender."

"But that's not your preference," Steve says, suddenly certain.

"No." Tony sips his coffee. "I'm of the Roanoke line."

Steve remembers them from the books. Of course Howard would have found a fancy line. Roanokes were--very healthy, which struck Steve as odd considering Tony's health issues. Supposedly quite attractive, charming, clever, but most famous for being able to bear utterly healthy children even from ill partners. "I'm not sure I get what you mean by that."

Tony blew on his coffee. "Omegas come in ranges, too. Some of us are more or less normal. I'm less. Less normal."

That--does not seem right. Tony Stark is one of a kind, sure, but he doesn't act like the most extreme omegas Steve had known back in the world. Steve just waits.

"I'm a hardcore submissive, Steven. You know that. I'm only physically attracted to alphas, specifically toppy ones. And I generally prefer men."

Oh. Steve opens his mouth. Shuts it again. "I'm *your type*?"

When Tony really smiles, his eyes crinkle. "Whoops?"

Steve can't really take it in. "Then last night, you--"

Tony raises his eyebrows. "Flirted?"

"You did a lot more than flirt, Tony!"

"I certainly did." His eyes are dancing again. "You didn't seem interested in taking what was on offer, though."

"That wasn't it at all and you know it!"

"I know." Tony puts his coffee cup down. He walks past Steve on his way out of the kitchen.

"Tony, wait." Steve should not ask this, but he needs to know.

Tony turns, looks back.

"I don't really understand you," Steve blurts out.

"Which bothers you more, Steven--that I like to suck cock on my knees? Or that I killed seventeen people in cold blood?"

Steve shoves a hand through his hair. He sets the large bowl of ice cream aside. "I was upset that you had to do it alone."

"I didn't, though." Tony leans against the doorframe, one leg crossed, picture of graceful ease. A beautiful man who's had twelve years of posture lessons drilled into him. He could be on a magazine cover, just like that. Has been. "I wasn't alone."

Steve watches Tony shift again, beautifully poised creature back to ill engineer. Then he's gone.

Chapter 50

Steve doesn't see Tony for nearly two weeks after that. According to Jarvis, Sir's vital signs are as well as can be expected. He is eating and sleeping to acceptable levels, whatever that means, because Jarvis won't say more. Steve has the feeling that Tony's out of Stark House as much as he's in it. Going where? Doing what?

Steve doesn't know.

Without anything better to do, he works on SHIELD projects, helps train at their downtown office, helps out where he's needed. Leaves voicemails for Tony when he can.

Steve reads all his books have on the Roanokes. He gets a sense that maybe Tony's right. A lot of them *aren't* quite normal. They tend to be of above-average intelligence. Almost always dark hair and eyes. Steve finds an alarming fan page devoted to them, and when he sees the photo of Tony and the cars, he just stares.

The first one is of Tony, shirtless, legs spread, leaning back on the hood of a classic Corvette. He's holding a wrench in one hand, and his jeans are so thin that you can see the curve of his cock. Steve has to adjust himself before going to the next image.

This time, Tony's bent over the trunk of a convertible, and he's turning to look at the photographer over his shoulder. His ass is....inspiring. He's wearing heeled boots with those jeans, and the heels tilt his ass at just the right angle. Tony's spine is gloriously curved. Steve touches the screen with one blunt finger.

Steve scrolls through a few more. There's another striking series of Tony shirtless, wearing nothing but jeans and holding a cigarette. He looks like pure trouble. That was for some European fashion magazine, but darned if Steve could figure out what it had to do with fashion. Although it might have sold a lot of jeans, he supposes.

Eccentric, talented, influential, the books say. Apparently the Roanokes' ability to create dynamically genetically healthy children is no fairy tale.

Roanokes have been married to aristocrats, merchant princes, pirates, and villains. Extremely fierce dams, they're considered as dangerous as a trapped bear if their children are threatened. The Consort of Duenna once shot a Crown Prince six times in the chest for walking into her nursery with what the story called 'dark intent'.

It's far too easy to picture Tony holding up a pistol, body straight, arm out, face focused. Heck, Tony does that pose all the time. He's just blasting people with energy instead of bullets.

But with that ability to bear healthy children comes a price. Roanokes are difficult. Temperamental. Moody. Sometimes alcoholics.

Steve's not surprised. Half the Roanokes he's read about were stolen from home, stuck in a castle, and bred like cattle. It would drive lesser people to the bottle.

The part of the site that details their health is surprisingly well-documented. Roanokes are often healthy, shockingly so. But their bodies do not react well to traditional medicines. The list of their 'not recommended' medications is long, and that's only the omega-approved meds. They're unusually prone to sensitive natures, and their hormones can swing out of balance. Old folk tales say that Roanokes are healthiest when married at sixteen and have a baby by twenty. They do well enough at contract marriages, but can fall into a decline if they repeatedly bear children that are taken away.

Well, yes, Steve thinks. No kidding.

The most healthy Roanokes are, as Tony suggested, bonded to strong alphas. The sort of alphas that walk into a room, and *everyone* moves out of their way.

Steve thinks of the bar he went to, last week. He'd been so sick of the modern world, he wanted a taste of the old. He'd dressed down in jeans and a tee shirt, leather jacket, gone to Brooklyn, found a place that smelled right. Spilled beer, stale smoke, loud music, girls in cheap makeup, men in heavy flannel and workboots. Where if another man slams into your shoulder, you give them what for. Where not getting out of the right man's way starts a fight.

No one had slammed into Steve's shoulder. They'd all moved out of his way as he approached, even backing off when he came up to the pool table. "Anyone playing?" Steve asked.

The two men holding cues shook their heads.

Right.

He is exactly Tony's type, but Tony is not speaking to him. Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. He has another headache. He's taken to calling it the Tony headache.

*

Steve camps out in the kitchen with a small bag of Coulson's coffee. He's getting a little desperate.

Four hours later, Tony paces in, looking almost gray with exhaustion. He takes one look at Steve and walks right back out.

Steve goes after him. "Tony, wait."

Tony whips around and backed up a step, suddenly tense and wary. Whoah. Steve holds his hands out at his sides, takes his own step back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"What do you *want*?"

Steve holds out the coffee.

Tony stares at it, looks up at Steve, back down at the bag. "OK?"

Steve shakes it gently. Coffee smell fills the air. "Peace offering. Please."

"Last time I took your coffee, it didn't go so well. Maybe this time you can just start by saying what you want."

Ouch. "I wanted to apologize. I think I said something that hurt your feelings."

"Really." Tony looks bemused. "Hurt my feelings. Rogers, you are something else. And that's it, you're sorry."

"Yes," Steve says, still holding out the bag. He isn't going to make the same mistake twice. He'd been stupid to try a bait and switch on Tony before. At least, that's how Tony would have seen it--that Steve was trying to soften Tony up. It wouldn't occur to Tony that Steve could be both fond *and* exasperated at the same time. Steve learned his lesson then, he hopes, and he's not going to try to further explain himself. Not right now.

Tony takes the bag like it might contain snakes. "And there is no but?"

"There is no but," Steve says. "I'm sorry, full stop. If, *if,* you would like to tell me what I did wrong, I'd like to know. So I can avoid doing it again. But only if you want to tell me."

Tony hefts the gift, sniffs it absently. "I'll think about it." He shifts his weight onto his heels, walks backwards down the hall. "Thanks."

Steve turns away. He thinks it's probably going to be more complicated than a simple apology, if Tony has hit the point where he can't even enter a room Steve is in.

Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

> *falls over ded* Regular posting will resume Friday. I decided this was a reasonably happy spot at which to pause. (Also, I realize some of these chapters are quite short, but it's for narrative flow.)

Tony spends a lot of time back at school. He's supposed to be helping Na Anderson crack some of the alien alloys, but he needs a break from Captain Tightpants.

"You're wound tight tonight."

Tony shoves his welding helmet off. He switches off the spark. It's too delicate to screw up just because he has yet another bad headache. "Sorry."

"It's getting worse."

Tony yanks off his gloves. "You're worse than fucking Captain America, you know that? And that is really saying something."

Na Anderson doesn't look upset by the comparison, she just takes her own gloves off. "I'll put on some tea."

The dizziness hits him as he's following her. He half-slides, half-falls to the floor. Only a grip on the workbench stops him from tumbling forward onto his face.

"OK, Tony, OK, I've got you, just here, that's it."

He smells granite, warm sun. Tony turns so he can bury his head against her shoulder. Old soft flannel, clean cotton, reeking of metal. "I'm alone."

"You're not alone. I'm right here."

"No, I mean, that's what he said."

"He who shall not be named," she says, amused. Fond. "He's not going to understand these things, Tony. It's not his world. You're going to have explain that part of the story to him."

"He was *wrong*."

"I'm sure."

"Are you laughing at me?" Tony snuggles closer. "It's wrong to laugh at someone who's sick."

"Would I do that?"

He grumbles. Yes, she damn well would. But he lets her help him back up after a while. By unspoken consent, he's sleeping in the small room he'd made, years ago, as he often does when he's here. It's one of the strongest places in the world, and Tony could use a decent night's sleep. Not that he'll get it. Still, it's worth a try.

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Tony's eating a sandwich and grading papers for her when she comes back the next day. He's spent most of the day asleep, but he's been doing a lot of that at home, too.

"You had a message from your boyfriend." Na Anderson moves the stack of graded papers off the chair so she can sit down.

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"Of course not." She sets a mug of that horrible weedy tea in front of him.

He sips it absently. Horrible. "This Kinsey kid did pretty good on the proofs."

"Tony. You have a horrible crush on him."

Fuck. Of course she won't let it go. "And that turned out so great last time."

"What last time, honey? Except for that brief interest in Alex, you haven't had a long term relationship your whole life."

Tony slams the mug back down on the table. "And I suppose you have?"

"You know I haven't." She holds her hand up. "No, don't you snark at me. I'm happy being your family. Living here. Knowing my friends. Building."

He leans back in his chair, crosses his arms. "I wish you'd come back to the city."

"We're not talking about that yet. We're talking about you. And your crush. He sounded kind on the message. I thought you really liked him. Sweetie, what happened?"

Tony drinks some of the vile weed tea. It's supposed to help his dizzy spells, but mostly it just tastes horrible. Like the chlorophyll, but with a seaweed dog-poop overtone. "He found out about before."

Na Anderson sighs. "It was going to happen eventually. I'm sorry."

Tony slouches down, cranky all over again.

"Wait," she says. "He took that part fine. I can tell. Tony--honey, what did you do?"

"How is this my fault?" Tony demands. "How?"

"The boy who blew up the soccer field to get back at Tansy Evans? I know you. Come on, cough it up."

Tony glares at her through his bangs. They're getting too long. "I might have fellated his fingers when he asked me about it. Then I kind of told him it was taken care of."

She raises one eyebrow. "Really."

Tony slumps down further. "And that I was the one who took care of it."

His answer is her rich deep laugh.

He goes back to drinking the hideous tea. She always insists he finish the stuff, because she's as relentless as Jarvis.

"So what happened, sweetie?"

Tony glares into his mug. "I just told you."

"No, you stopped in the middle. Finish the story."

"There's nothing to finish," Tony says, raising his chin.

"Tony."

Fine. "Look, he was asking about the damn fallout from those fuckers, and I sucked on his fingers. What do you want me to say?"

"He didn't take you up on it?"

"He *left*, OK? I made Captain fucking America flee the fucking living room."

"OK," she says easily, sipping her own tea. She doesn't have to drink it for dizziness, she just does it to keep him company. "Then the next day?"

"He talks to me in the kitchen." Tony remembers the hesitant steps, the worry lines on Steve's face.

"Did you ask him why he fled?"

"It was *obvious* why he fled!" Tony slams the mug down. Tea splashes her desk, but she doesn't even mop at it.

"You think he was disgusted. Repulsed. By you." Her voice is calm, gentle. "Sweetie, you of all people should know that responses are complicated." Her hand touches his. "What did he smell like?"

"I can get anyone interested," Tony says, dismissing that. "I gave his fingers a damn blowjob."

Her hand is smaller than his, but it's just as work-worn, just as scarred. There's fine black soot under her nails that doesn't always go away, her fingers sometimes stained with the work. "Given what I know of him," she says slowly, "I wonder if there's another possibility. You smelled, what? Arousal? Violence? Shame?"

Tony lifts one shoulder. Yes, and all of it awash together. He knows damn well what it means. It's one thing to find the omega in your living room attractive, it's another thing to realize he's got that much blood on his hands from murdering people. So much for the traditional stay at home sweetheart Steve's got in mind. Of course he's going to be ashamed of finding Tony attractive.

Na Anderson picks up a spare cleaning cloth stained with grease, mops absently at Tony's spill. Folds the cloth into fourths, puts his mug down on it to prevent further spills. "Honey, I think it's possible, I think it's *likely* that something was going on."

"There is no other logical possibility that's likely," Tony says, arms crossed, defensive, but seriously? She is arguing with him about this? "What other possibility is there?"

She meets his eyes, direct, intent. "What if he found your fierceness itself attractive? What if he liked that you killed them? What if he found that arousing? What if he wishes he had known you back then, so he could have accompanied you on your hunts? What if he's jealous of whoever you did have back then?" Her hand covers his again. "Sweetheart, Steve's a good man who believes in law and order and the justice system, minimal violence. He would be ashamed of himself for loving that you killed them all."

Tony looks back at her and has no idea what to say.

She's wrong.

She has to be.

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

I am posting this chapter a day early in celebration of my *fucking fantastic readers*, who have stuck with me through grim!dark and peril, interludes and surprise trips, asked amazing questions and commented with theories and fretted and worried over these characters that I love so much and offered me cookies and kind suggestions and generally have made my fucking day.

I honestly had no idea when I started posting this story that there would be any readers for it. It's dark, it's got lots of sex but not much porn (until the latter half, where I hope I will more than make up for the lack, ahem), it's got original characters left right and center, it's freakishly long, it's by a total unknown. But I was just moved to share it, and I'm so glad I did.

Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Now! To the story! Just FYI, you will find out more about Steve's experiences in the HC here. For now, I'll just reassure y'all that it was fully consensual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Captain Can't Leave Well Enough Alone calls the next day. And the next.

"Tony, it's for you." Na Anderson hands him her own phone. (He's finally talked her into one by making the casing in a rare alloy. He's probably lucky she hasn't just stuck it on her wall with the other alloy samples.) Then she leaves. Traitor.

Tony tucks the phone against his ear. He's trying to corral thirteen seven years old in the upper workshop, and it's going to turn him gray. "Stark."

"Tony?"

Tony straightens. "Melissa! Put down that jar right now. Don't make me come over there. Corey, don't hit your sister."

"Um, Tony, where are you?"

"Little tied up at the moment, Captain. What can I do for you?" Tony reaches behind him without looking and snatches the jar of colored glass out of the sneaky Kiley's hands.

"Are those *children*?"

"Yeah." Tony stands on his tiptoes. "If I get one more stolen jar, then we're going back to sitting in the circle. What did I tell you earlier?"

There's a chorus of "But Na Staaaaaaaaaaaaaark." The hooligans quit climbing the shelves though. Good. His wrath isn't as terrible as Na Anderson's, but he can shout a lot louder.

"Captain, seriously. Busy here. What's up?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Uh huh. No, I said *No*, Melissa. What did I say? That's right, good girl. Troy, please go get the stir sticks from the teacher's table. Thank you."

"Are you--Tony are you with kids?"

"Uh, yeah, think I said that already." Tony looks them over. "Hannah, you go get the trays. Carefully please, *good* girl. Scott, how about you bring over the sample book. I know, very important job, you're like an assistant. Perfect. Great."

"You sound like you really know what you're doing." Cap's voice sounds kind of dazed. "How many are there?"

"Thirteen, for my sins." Tony holds his right hand up. All the kids mimic him. He counts heads. Still thirteen. Thank god. With the seven year olds, it's a good idea to count constantly. "And I had fourteen college credits worth of early childhood education."

"You--did?"

"Yes. Look, did you need something?" The Captain sounds so strange. Oddly tentative. "Are we assembling?"

"No, it's nothing like that." Cap's voice turns oddly shy. "I just wanted to talk to you. I missed you, that's all."

"Aw, Steven, I'm touched. Melissa!" Tony reaches over and snatches the dried macaroni out of her tiny, evil clutches.

"You called me Steven again."

"It is your name." Melissa looks like she's about to cry. "Do not even with me, kid. You were going to put that up Paul's nose."

"I missed it," Cap says softly.

Fuck. Tony'd actually intended not to do that anymore. Especially because of what he'd been doing the last time he said it. Goddamn tiny supervillainous Melissa distracted him. "Thought you didn't like it. I mean it, Melissa. We do not put macaroni up other people's nose."

"But Na Staaaaaark."

Cap stifles a laugh. "You have your hands full. I should let you go. I'm sorry, Tony, I think I gave you the wrong impression--I enjoyed that evening very much. Well, not learning about what happened, but the--what you did after."

Tony snatches a juice box out of Ricky's hand seconds before disaster. He'd had to jump over another little girl sitting politely where she was supposed to--Jenny's probably related to Cap. "I--huh. Really?" Because, no, that can't be right.

"Oh, yes." Cap's voice is earnest, quiet. Perfectly sincere. "Very much."

Melissa makes a grab for the stir sticks that Troy has just brought over. She moves fast, and she leaps up and dashes off, pointing it like a sword and cackling madly. Bedlam erupts. Tony hears Cap's warm deep laugh. "Call me later, Tony. If you get out alive."

Tony's so busy leaping tiny children and workshop benches that he can't answer until after Cap's hung up.

When absolutely everyone is back in a circle, sitting *nicely* goddammit, watching him demonstrate how to dip a punt of hot glass, Tony stops to wonder how Cap got Na Anderson's phone number.

His scarred fingers twist the rod of hot glass into pre-colored shards as he thinks. If the kids want a red white and blue globe today, Tony doesn't argue about it as much as he normally would.

*

Tony's ensconced in the deep rock bunker in the deepest basement workshop, all the doors shut, all the bolts thrown. He's curled up in loose soft pants (bamboo, knit, gorgeously soft because while he may not care what he looks like here, comfort is a constant) and nothing else. The blankets smell of him, of work, of home.

Cell reception used to be lousy, what with all the steel reinforced beams and thick concrete, but Tony fixed that years ago.

It feels almost teenager like to call Steve back. In bed, feet halfway up the wall. In Tony's defense, it's a pretty small space. It's not like he can sprawl.

"Rogers."

"Hey, Steven."

"Tony!"

Cap sounds so happy. He really is like a human golden retriever. Freak. Tony rolls his eyes. "I told you I'd call you back."

"Thank you. How was your class?"

"I triumphed eventually. Melissa Stevens is either going to rule the world or kill us all."

"The macaroni in the nose girl?"

"That's the one." Tony stretches his toes out. He took a shower before he went to bed, so his feet are bare. He can see the faint tracery of scars on his right foot.

"Now I know how you spotted that guy playing Galaga. You have eyes in the back of your head, just like my mother."

It's the kind of comment that sometimes makes Tony bristle, but it's so sincere from Steve that he can't really even call him on it. "Hate to ruin the illusion, but I just have extreme hyperarousal in new environments, Captain."

"That shrink talk for paranoid?"

"Something like that."

"Why do you talk down about yourself like that, Tony?"

Had he been? Tony doesn't know what to say to that. Rogers is like this weird squishy teddy bear right up until he loses his temper and switches back to that scrappy kid. Tony's aware of his environment because he scans as diligently as a fucking Ranger just back from a tour. He's got the bitching from Rhodes to prove it, plus his stable of shrink reports.

Steve sighs softly. "Never mind. I wanted to ask you something."

"Uh oh." Tony stretches his neck until it cricks. This has never been the ultimate mattress sleeping experience, but it's safe.

"Shh. It's not bad. I'm just curious about something."

Really uh-oh. Tony pulls his feet off the wall, curls them under the blankets. "OK."

"How come your parents sent you to boarding school?"

Tony pulls the covers up over his chest. The sheer rock walls of part of the bunker keep it cold, but the other side is warm from the forge. Tony scoots closer. "They never said. Look, I know you and my dad were friends and all, but he was not exactly my biggest fan." Understatement of the century. "Is that why you called? To ask about him?"

"No. I wondering who helped you, and I thought maybe....an old friend of the family worked at the school or something."

"Oh." Tony snuggles deeper under the covers, picks at a loose thread. Some of the blankets are ancient flannel shirts. "No. I didn't know anyone here when I arrived. So far as I'm aware, none of the adults working here knew my folks. Mom wanted me out of trouble, away from the spotlight. Dad just wanted me off his hands."

"Tony, I'm--"

"Steven. If you say some shit about my dad loving me deep in his heart of hearts, I will hang up this phone."

"Your voice changes when you're around the kids. You sound less stressed, Tony. I'm glad."

Holy whiplash, batman. "Yeah, whatever. I was just helping out."

"It was kind of you to do."

Tony snuggles deeper. "Anyway."

"Praise makes you nervous." Steve's voice has lowered, and there's a soft burr in it. "I'll be more careful in the future. But I wanted to ask you something else."

Tony's readying a spiel about how much he fucking loves praise, bring on all the praise right now. But that makes him pause. "Yeah?" Maybe it's a nice easy tech question. Steve loves to ask Tony random shit about the future's tech. Probably because everyone else just says 'I don't know' when Steve asks straightforward questions like 'how does a microwave work'.

"The other night. When you made me ice cream. You seemed to think I would mind two things."

Oh fuck. Which bothers you more, Steve, that I love to get on my knees and suck cock, or that I killed seventeen people in cold blood? "It's possible I was drunk at the time."

"I don't think so." He's back to nearly amused. "You said it, I get to think about it."

"You really ought to just ignore 90% of the shit that comes out of my mouth. Everyone else does."

"I like to hear you talk, Tony. Remember?"

Oh god. Fucking unfair. "I remember."

"I didn't want to touch you when you'd done something to cover my error that first time. That's why I didn't...." Cap sighs. "I know you said before that you understood how it worked in my world, but I think maybe I need to be more clear."

"Oh-kay."

There's a pause and an odd rustling sound. Cap clears his throat. "I find you very attractive. I really enjoyed the way you went submissive under my hands on the helicopter. It was a tremendous gift. The other night, when we talked, I was very aroused, close to a Fight. If I'd touched you, I was afraid I'd hurt you. I was sure I would have."

Tony has no idea what to say to that. "Really."

"I'd have hauled you off that chair and fucked you on the floor, Stark."

"Well." Tony slips his hand under his pajama pants and adjusts himself. "I thought you were interested more in the genre of me than, you know, me per se right there."

"I know. You thought I was attracted because you're the nearest unclaimed, unbonded omega, and that's what I find attractive. Wikipedia says that omegas make up about 8% of the New York city population. That's New York, which is a liberal, comparatively wealthy place."

"Right. Small percentage." Thanks for that ego-boost, Steve.

"*Wrong*, Tony. Coming from my world, that's huge. Do you know how many omegas propositioned me at the Madison Square Gala? Thirty two."

"Gee, thanks for that share. I fucked an alpha beta couple in the bathroom and then blew an alpha behind the bar while he was talking to one of the city council members and a dude from the State Department."

"On a bet, I presume." Steve refuses the bait, though. "When I was in the war, I knew omegas. The Commandos had several. Don't freak out, I'll explain later. I'm used to seeing maybe 1-4%. But even in those circumstances, I could find someone I wanted. It was war, Stark. And war is hell. Do you think I was going into battle without ever having sex? We all thought we were going to die."

Well, yes, Tony had actually thought Cap was fairly inexperienced. Not a virgin, but not able to find his ideal type. Otherwise, why else would Steve be single? It's only logical. The guy's Captain fucking America for Chrissakes.

"Look. I'm telling you this because I want you to understand that I've *had* the opportunity to enjoy a particular type," Steve says.

"And you didn't like it as much as you thought?"

"No, Stark." Steve sighs. "Look, this is still difficult for me to talk about."

"You did bring it up."

"I know." Another sigh. "What you said, about my preferences, was accurate. I enjoy the company of other types. I can see that the alpha women are beautiful or the beta men are handsome."

Tony waits, curled so far under his pile of blankets that the only light is from the reactor.

"The only ones I find sexually attractive are omegas. I am," Steve stops, tries again. "My preference is for sexually submissive omegas. That's what I like. I've had sex with omegas who are more equal, and it's okay, it's fine, I came, it was good. But taking a very submissive omega to bed is completely different."

"Tell me about the omegas you've fucked, Steven."

Steve is silent so long that Tony's sure he pushed him too far. But dammit, he didn't bring the topic up, and Steve knows a fuckton more about Tony than Tony gets to know about Steve.

"When I was in France, there was an Resistance fighter who joined our group. She was very beautiful. Fierce."

"She belonged to the whole group." Tony knows it happened, knows it's one of the reasons that omegas are banned from combat situations now.

"Yes." Steve doesn't sound ashamed, just tired. "She was a more moderate omega. Loved to fight, loved to sing. After combat, you have to understand, when you get out of a situation like that, it can be...important to come down."

"After a combat drop, when you got back, you had a warm body waiting for you. I get it."

"Yes. Like I said, I enjoyed her. She liked to be on top. Loved to bite." Steve laughs shakily. "God, I can't believe I'm telling you this. Anyway. It was nice."

"But it didn't really blow your mind."

"Not quite how I would have put it, Stark, but yes. You have to understand that this was war. I was leading a troop of men who were, we all spent a lot of time in Fight. It made us, oh, volatile I guess is the word. Willing to risk near-suicide missions, sneak behind enemy lines, get our jobs done."

"That much time in a primal state can do things." Tony knows it's true, because the Army has made very careful changes to certain deployment procedures. Too much PTSD, too much outright pack behavior back home. Scares the civvies. Doesn't always work, though. Sometimes people on short tours still go primal, stay primal.

"Yes." Steve's voice is calm, honest, earnest as ever.

"Tell me what you did, Steven." It's a risk, but Tony thinks that in his own way, Steve is asking permission. Permission to talk about something he thinks is wrong, something that will upset Tony.

"I was the leader. As such," Steve says, "there were certain things that were accorded to me. I almost never indulged in those benefits, but I did occasionally. We all got very pack-like after a while. First crack at food went to our omegas, of course. Nobody ate until they were full." Steve snorts. "Some snot-nosed Lieutenant from HQ grabbed a candy bar before Ezra was done eating one time. Ezra loved candy."

Tony feels a chill shiver down his spine. "Did you kill him?"

There's a long pause. "No. But only because Ezra asked me not to. That wasn't even the worst of the things we did, Tony."

"Steven, this is all very fascinating, and I'm get a little hot under the collar just listening to your voice in the dark, but I want to hear about the sex. What did you do?"

"You are very pushy, Stark."

"You love it."

Steve huffs a laugh. "Yeah. I do. All right. The sex."

Tony waits, because he's even more sure it's something that Steve is ashamed of, and he's also dead sure it's something that Steve still dreams about. Something that he finds arousing, something he maybe jerks off to, when he's desperate, and that he maybe hates himself for later.

"We'd just finished a bad mission. Wrong intel. No prize at the end. Just blood and mud and rain and a lot of wounded men sacrificing their necks for *nothing*. I was having a hard time coming down, we all were, but we were nearly back at camp. Then we were ambushed. Again."

Right, primal stuff. Tony makes a quiet 'go on' noise.

"We took care of the ambush, but more of my men were wounded. I was almost at camp, and one of my scouts met us to give me a paper. Orders, revised, about another mission in two days and one that needed us specifically, do or die, and it was just too much. It was more bad intel, bad strategy, bad planning, I could just *tell*, and I was furious, and I lost it."

"What did you do, Steven?"

"I stalked into camp with the rest of my men. Usually, I let the others have the omegas first. I don't normally mind waiting, and it's one of the few gifts I could give them. Especially if a fella was wounded, I'd let them tend to him, fuss over him a little."

"But not this time."

"No. I passed some of the guys left behind, and they were playing cards. Ezra was in Hank's lap. They were good friends, but I just looked at him, and everyone went silent, and then Ezra was scrambling off Hank's lap and into my tent."

"You pulled rank."

"Oh yes."

"How long did it take you to even let him out of your tent?"

"Three days."

Tony's eyes widen. That's not quite what he'd have expected from the boyscout. "And what else?"

"I made sure everyone knew exactly what we were doing. Usually, I'd be quiet. This time, I made him scream."

"Your name?"

Steve snorts. "My name. God's name. Whatever seemed good at the time. I fucked him, and I marked him, and when I wasn't in a better mood later, the guys sent in two more omegas, and I fucked them too, while Ezra lay curled in my blankets and watched."

"The guys thought you might wear him out?"

"I think the guys thought I was in a killing mood, and we had an HQ staffer due in the next day."

"What did you do?"

"Well, uh, you have to understand--different times, Tony."

"Steven."

"When HQ came, I was sitting in my tent, pouring over strategy maps. I had Ezra in my lap, naked, wearing a collar, and I was just kind of touching him absently as I worked."

"Kinky."

"Stupid. He smelled like sex, Tony. Every HQ staffer who walked in that room knew exactly what I'd been doing to him. Hell, I made sure of it."

"You didn't let Ezra wash." Tony's amused, because it's so blatant, it's nearly something Tony would do.

"Yes, well." Cap's voice is suddenly prim. "Anyhow. There were six HQ big wigs in my Captain's tent, trying to look at my maps, going over the next mission. Their eyes kept crossing, because they couldn't find a safe place to look."

Tony laughs, rich and low. "Steven, you didn't."

"I did." Steve sounds embarrassed but resigned.

"You'd fucked *all* of your other omegas and laid them around the tent, too. My, my."

Steve sighs. "It was a really dumb, dangerous thing to do. I was picking a damn fight."

"What did Ezra do with all those other HQ alphas in the room?" For some reason, Tony doesn't think that Ezra just laid there like the living part of a frieze.

"Well. He, um. This one general was starting to say how the last mission should have gone better, and Ezra sits up. He turns and straddles my lap, wraps his arms around my neck, and you know, Tony, I shouldn't be telling you this story. It's probably not fair to Ezra."

Tony snorts. "He straddled your lap enough so his legs spread and his ass was perfectly displayed to show off that ultra alpha Captain Steven Rogers' semen was trickling out of him and if Ezra had his way, he'd be face down over the maps table, getting another dose, generals or no generals. Am I right?"

"I didn't ask him to," Steve says quietly.

"I bet they all suddenly backed up. You must have poured off the most amazing scent when he did that."

"Well, they did back up," Steve mutters. "Look, Tony, after that, I tried not to do that kind of thing again. Ezra and Hank had something special going, and I didn't want to mess that up."

"But you were the pack leader, so it was your right to do it, whether Ezra had something with Hank or not."

Steve's quiet for a while. "Yes."

"And yet you called me to tell me that you like me, regardless of whether it's your right to have me in your bed?"

"Not quite, Tony."

Tony frowns. He's pretty sure he's gotten better at reading Steve, and Steve had said that. Tony's sure of it. "What then?"

"I called to tell you that I like how submissive you are."

"You--" Tony slides out from under the covers. "Run that by me again."

"I like how submissive you are. The way you can slide into a completely boneless warm lapful if I hold your neck. The way you were spread on that table, the first time you warned me that you did whatever you wanted with your own body. It was beautiful. I don't think you really understand how gorgeous you are when you're being fucked. The way you looked right at me and blew a kiss."

"I was pretty pissed at you, Rogers."

"I know. You taunted me. But it was--I wanted to take out that general, tell him that you're mine, slide in where he'd been."

Tony swallows. "I thought there was a chance you might have, you know."

"I know." Steve clears his throat.

"Why didn't you?"

"You'd never have trusted me again."

Tony can't argue with him there, but he's not sure what else he can say. "I meant what I said about that. I make my own choices. I get that pulling rank is very arousing for you, and I'm not averse to a few sex games like that, but ultimately, if I want someone's cock in me, I'm going to let them. Or not let them. And damn what you have to say about it."

"Yes," Steve says, and his voice is low, rumbling, almost the way he'd sounded in the copter that time. "I know."

"Steven--" Tony smiles in the dark, startled and surprised. "Are you saying that you *enjoyed* the way I showed off for you?"

There's another low rumbling growl, then Steve says at last, "Do you remember what I told you in the copter? When you were in my lap?"

"I don't remember a lot of the words. I was a little distracted by what you were doing."

"Mmm." Steve sounds pleased about that. "I meant about the arguing."

"Vaguely." Tony recalls Steve telling him to talk about work, to argue or Steve wouldn't pet his neck anymore. "I thought you were being a gentleman."

"No. I like when you argue. It's no fun to dominate someone who just lies there, Tony."

"Many of my past conquests would disagree with you."

"Your conquests are idiots. I'm sure I've mentioned that before."

Steve has, in fact, and while Tony can't disagree, he's also not sure what to say. "You're telling me that you find it *sexy* when I argue. Are you serious?"

"Perfectly serious. Most of the time you argue, you fight, you ambush, you fight to the death, but every now and again, you let go and go under. I never know which way you'll turn. When you gave in during that fight, I was enraptured. Not even Ezra went under for me like that. You'd have let me do anything, wouldn't you?"

Why deny it? "Yes."

"Anything," Steve says again, coaxing.

"My anything is more encompassing than most people's."

"I know. Better now than I did before." There's a short pause, an inhaled breath. "I want that. You, in my bed."

"I'm willing to take you on a joy ride. I hope I've made that pretty clear. When I get back, I'll come to you, and you can have me however you want me."

"What if I want a relationship?"

Tony sits up and the pile of cloth and blankets pools around him. "Jesus Christ, Rogers. I'm not a teenage girl you're taking to the prom."

"Do you know how to dance, Tony?"

Tony's shoved the blankets out of the way so he can reach the bourbon. His hand stills. He remembers the clubbing, the aftermath, but he knows Steve is talking about another kind of dancing. "I attended thirteen years of elite omega prep-school. I can dance."

"Rhumba?"

Tony unscrews the cap on the bourbon and takes a long swig. He hasn't rhumba'd in years. It's a dance of seduction. Fucking Rogers.

"Answer me."

The cool voice goes straight down to Tony's dick. He glares at his lap in frustration. "Yes, all right? I can also Lindy-Hop."

"No." Steve sounds amused. "Nice try, but no. I like something a little more sensual."

"Is that what you danced with *Ezra*?" It's out of his mouth before he can stop it.

"Bitchy. I like it."

Tony narrows his eyes. "I am *not* bitchy."

"Mmhm. But to answer your question, no, I never danced with any of the omegas. I never needed or wanted to court them."

"Oh my god, you are not courting me." Tony knocks back a long drink. "I'm not--that's not what this is."

"I was going to dance with Peggy. After I got back."

"But you don't even like betas." Tony's annoyed that he's feeling both angry at Steve's self-destructive stupidity in dating a damn beta and fiercely jealous. God damn his life.

"If I married her, and I wanted to, I thought we'd find an omega."

"For the bedroom," Tony snaps.

"Yes." Steve doesn't sound put out. "Peggy could have her career, we both could, but we'd still be able to have a family. I liked Peggy. She was beautiful and competent and fierce. But I didn't want her in my bed every night."

Tony doesn't answer. He moodily rearranges his blankets, scoots under them.

"Not the way I want you," Steve says, coaxing.

"I'm not a baby-factory, Rogers. I'm an asshole, an inventor--"

"Genius, billionaire, plaything, philanthropist. I remember. But I also like how comfortable you sounded with those kids. I'd trust you with my children, Anthony. I wouldn't say that about a lot of people."

"What the fuck is this? Some kind of weird mating come on?"

"If you like. I want a relationship, Stark. I'm not asking you to give up *anything* you don't want to give up. The world needs Iron Man. The world needs the things you make. But when you're in my bed, I want it to mean something."

"I'm not good at that," Tony says, voice low and frustrated. "I can give you a damn good fuck, but I don't do relationships."

"Why not?"

"What do you mean, *why not*?"

"Well, what are you basing that on?" Steve says it like it's a reasonable question.

"I live in a penthouse loft with steel reinforced beams on every goddamn doorway. My entire house is rigged to detonate if my vital signs hit certain points. I've been diagnosed as clinically paranoid and touch-averse for most of my adult life."

"So?"

"So! What do you mean, *So?* Steven, we can fuck, and I can enjoy it, but half the time there's a part of me that isn't even there! Do you have any idea how easy it is for me to flip into dissociation and wake up in somebody else's bed?"

"Are you telling me that you won't be faithful?" Steve doesn't sound particularly worried about it.

"Steven. I'm telling you that I have no idea what the fuck I'll do."

"OK, Tony."

"*It's not OK."*

"Tony. I'm an adult. Look, I just want to take you out on a date. Is that too much to ask?"

"I hate it when you sound so reasonable," Tony grumbles. "It's just not natural."

"All I want you to do is let me take you out for an evening. One night. You said you'd let me do whatever I want with you." Steve manages to sound almost pouty.

Tony glares at his phone. "I was thinking more about *fucking* however you wanted."

"I want to hold you in my arms, move you around the dance floor, and seduce you while everyone watches. You know they'll watch, Stark, and I know you like that."

Tony's mouth opens, shuts again.

"Tony. You love to show off. Maybe I want to show off that I can seduce Tony Stark while he's still wearing clothes. Maybe I want to have the prettiest boy in the world in my arms,

not worry about anything else besides what Steven Rogers wants for a change."

"You are such a sap. I'm not wearing a damn dress, I'm warning you now."

"I don't want you to wear a dress." Steve's voice lowers. "I'm picking you up, so we'll be on my bike. Wear those jeans. You know the ones--so worn they're almost see through in all the right places. Those heeled boots with the chains. A tight shirt, not one of those button-downs."

"I'm going to look like a dockworker."

"Mmm, I know. Friday night, OK?"

"Friday night is fine," Tony says, still grumpy. "This is against my better judgment. I just want to say that upfront. If this goes south, it's on you."

"Of course. You're just doing what I want. Anything that happens after that's on me. Don't think of it as a date. Just think of it as giving me exactly what I want."

Tony's eyes close and his dick twitches. "Does Fury know you're doing this?'

"Fury knows everything about everyone. He's the nosy grandmother of the superhero neighborhood. I should go, but before I do--Anthony, one more thing."

"What?" Tony says, wary.

"Spend some time in the workshop right before the date. I like you best when you're fresh from work and you smell like engine grease and fire. Makes me want to bend you right over your workbench."

Tony stares at his phone. "Fucking hell, he hung up."

Chapter End Notes

Tomorrow is date night!

Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

For your delectation and amusement:
Tony's boots are Frye classic Engineer 12rs in black
with a vintage Harley-style boot chain

Tony is distracted the rest of the week. By Thursday, he knows he's not getting anything done on the alloy project, and he's just in Na Anderson's way. He leaves first thing Friday morning. Even though Tony thinks this is a fucking stupid idea that is probably going to end in tears, especially for their resident boyscout, he finds the jeans. They're ancient, pale, and he can't wear them too often anymore because they're about two seconds away from falling apart.

He owns exactly the right kind of boots, too, and Tony maybe shouldn't be surprised that Cap wants him in engineer boots. He puts them on, adds some cologne, tops it off with an old black concert shirt that's tight across his chest.

Tony's tempted to let the work project pull him into hyperfocus, let himself get lost in the work, lose this nervous energy by staying with machines instead of people.

At quarter to seven, Tony puts the tools away. He wipes his damp palms on his jeans. There's lipgloss in his pocket, and Tony's not exactly sure whether it's a good idea or not. He's already put on the full smoky eyeliner, but maybe Steve won't like it. God, he's such a fucking mess.

Tony's storming out of the elevator to hit the bathroom to wash everything off, put on a suit, look normal, when he sees Steve's blond head over the back of Tony's favorite chair. Steve must have heard him, because he turns, his head pops up, and he's smiling. "All ready?"

No. "Sure."

Steve's not wearing the horrible madras of evil at least. Tony's bought the man enough new shirts, but he's still surprised. Steve's got his airman's brown bomber jacket and a white tee shirt, Levis, brown boots with no heel. At least Tony isn't going to be towered over too much when they dance. Steve slips on his shades, smiles. "You look fantastic."

Tony doesn't know what the hell to do with a straight line like that tonight. He looks away, turns his head to the side. Steve's hand is suddenly there, tracing his jaw.

"I mean it," Steve says. "Thank you for dressing up for me."

"I dressed *down* for you. None of this is even bespoke. It's killing me."

Steve dips his head and drops a kiss at Tony's temple. Freak. Rogers is a freak. "That's what makes it so sweet that you're indulging me."

Tony's sputtering about sweet the whole way down to the damn bike. Steve slides on like it's home, and Tony climbs on behind. He's ridden motorcycles before, but not as a passenger.

Steve grabs his hands and puts them firmly on Steve's waist, holds Tony's hands there. Tony's not stupid enough to believe it's just for safety. He knows a dominance play when he sees one. Steve just likes moving Tony around. "Good thing you're cute, Rogers."

"Good thing," Steve agrees. Then he kicks the bike into roaring life and takes off like a bat out of hell.

Tony is so busying holding on for dear life that he has no idea where they're headed. Someplace towards Brooklyn, he thinks, but Christ, Steve passes in and out of cabs and traffic and squeaks under a yellow and finally Tony just buries his face against Steve's shoulder and laughs. The engine is roaring between his legs, Steve smells fantastic, and they're going a million miles an hour.

Maybe a date isn't such a terrible way to spend a Friday night.

*

Tony holds that thought through a quiet dinner (simple, beautifully cooked American, no surprise) and then an hour of the most frustrating erotic dancing Tony has ever danced in his fucking life.

Steve has perfect balance and tremendous strength. For all his size, he can move delicately when he wants to. Tony's pulled in close, drawn out, pulled in close again, all while Steve just looks at him, intent.

Tony has no illusions that if they were anywhere close to a bed, he'd be flat on his back.

At least, they would be if it was up to Tony.

After the last rhumba's over, Steve draws him against his side.

"Please tell me we can go home now," Tony says. His jeans have been tight for hours.

Steve's hand slides up and down Tony's back, right over his spine. "I thought we might play a few rounds of pool."

"You just want to see me bend over a table with something long and hard in my hands."

"Of course."

Tony can't help laughing, because Steve is so earnest. He gets it, though. This is not a date that Captain Rogers, US Army would go on. It's sure as hell not Captain America, paragon of virtue and apple pie. This is a date that Steve Rogers, scrappy kid from Brooklyn, wanted. Tony hasn't missed the prevalence of lower class toughs every place they've gone.

Steve's more relaxed in this ambience, which is kind of interesting. At home with the guns, the gang signs, the neon, the pros on some of the corners. Well, Tony's safe enough. It's not like Cap is going to get into a bar fight on their first date.

God, Tony thinks later, for a genius he can be world-class stupid.

*

"Let it go, Steve," Tony says, clinging to Steve's waist from behind as best he can, both feet braced. "Steven!"

It's not helping. Steve just hauls him forward, one hand carefully holding Tony behind him, the other cocking back again, fist poised.

"He didn't mean anything by it!" Tony says desperately. "Jesus, you lummox, hold still."

"Take that back," Steve growls, ignoring Tony.

Oh Christ, Tony thinks. Does the random asshole have a death wish? It's like testosterone poisoning in here. He tries again to move to one side so he can get Steve to look at him, but Steve just shoves him behind his back again, like Tony weighs nothing.

"Why should I?" the asshole shouts. "He's not yours. Pussy that pretty is fair game--"

Then Steve's fist plows right into the guy's face. And OK, that should not be hot, it really really shouldn't be, but it is. Tony watches the guy tumble back into somebody else's table.

And that's it.

The whole damn bar errupts into chaos.

*

Tony limps back into the living room. Steve trails behind him, practically wringing his hands.

"It's just a split lip. I've had worse." Tony's going right for the freezer, because he knows what to do for this. "I can't believe you're worried *now*."

"Your lip is bleeding!"

"Steve, you started a damn bar brawl in a Brooklyn pool hall. I'm pretty sure you broke that guy's nose."

"He shouldn't have said that."

Tony rolls his eyes. There's a huge stack of ice packs in the freezer of various sizes. He grabs one and hands it to Steve, who of course tries to hold it to Tony's face.

"No, you idiot, it's for your shoulder."

"But the serum--"

"Oh for the love of god. You got a table dropped on you. Your shirt is a wreck. Take the fucking ice pack!"

Steve lashes lower. He takes the ice pack and holds it to his shoulder.

"Good." Tony gets himself a smaller ice pack and holds it to his temple. He doesn't care about the split lip, but he's got a headache from getting hit with a pool cue. At least it wasn't a bar stool.

Steve is still just sort of standing there in the kitchen, holding the ice pack. He looks embarrassed, but not really sorry.

Tony leans against the kitchen counter. "You love a good fight."

"I don't start them."

"No, but you do end them." Tony shakes his head. "Except for the brawl, I had a really nice time."

"I wasn't really expecting that part."

"Right, because trawling an unbonded omega in lipgloss through a bar full of rough trade on a Friday night is a recipe for a quiet evening."

Steve's eyes narrow. "He shouldn't have--"

"Said that. Yes." Tony pats Steve's insanely broad chest. The once-white tee shirt is toast. Beer, grime, other people's blood, something that's probably nachoes. "You're batshit insane. But sweet."

"Do I still get my goodnight kiss?"

"I was kind of hoping for a goodnight fuck."

"No," Steve says, but he holds Tony's whole face in one of his large hands. "Goodnight, Tony."

Then he's kissing Tony, split lip and all. Damn, Steve can kiss. He starts sweet, slow, then he just kind of takes over. Tony's braced against the counter, hanging on for dear life, and Steve's licking the blood away, and he's tasting inside Tony's mouth, and he's nipping Tony's lower lip, and Tony's making needy desperate noises and trying to hump his leg because oh my god.

Then suddenly, it's all over. Steve pulls away, steps back.

Tony has to grab the counter with both hands so he doesn't fall. He's panting and hard and wet.

Steve looks him up and down, a slow survey. "God, you're beautiful. Thanks for indulging me. Goodnight."

And then he's *gone*.

Tony shuts his eyes. He slides his own damn hand into his jeans, grips his cock just a second, then slides below, fingers desperate to get himself some relief. It only takes him a moment to finger fuck himself into a brutal orgasm. His head tipped back, panting, and the fingers aren't enough, he needs it again, brings himself off a second time, imagining it's Steve inside him.

Tony doesn't care if the kitchen reeks of spent sex. Turnabout should be fucking fair play.

He staggers off to his bedroom, falls face down on the bed, and sleeps until noon.

Chapter 54

Even though it's Saturday, they've got a damn team meeting on the Hellicarrier that afternoon. Tony dresses in one of his favorite suits with tie and pocket hankerchief. He's tempted to dress in worn jeans and eyeliner again, but it's not like Rogers is going to give in to temptation in a SHIELD facility, so it would be a wasted effort.

Tony breezes into the meeting room and is brought up short. There's Barton. "I thought you'd be in the vents."

"Very funny, man. What's this I hear about you turning over a bar in Brooklyn?"

"I don't know what you mean," Tony says. He pulls out his phone and starts working on the quinjet modifications, because he so does not want to talk about this. "Where's Coulson?"

"Brazil, with Banner."

"You get me today, Stark." Fury walks in, looking like Darth Vader, as he is wont to do.

Fucking fabulous. Tony is still pissed with Fury, after the dirty trick he'd pulled over Coulson. Saving the world or not, it was a shitty thing to do. Every time he sees the man he has to resist the urge to swear.

Then Steve walks in. Tony looks up, but he tries to be subtle about. The Captain's back to the hideous plaid and khakis, brown jacket smelling of wind. Tony wonders if he sped the whole way here, or if he's a more sedate driver when he doesn't have a passenger.

Tony doesn't get to worry long, though, because Fury's giving them intel on a new villain. Tony's busy researching and data plotting and so focused down on his work that he nearly misses it. He hears something about Brooklyn, though, and that makes him look up. "What?"

"Good of you to join us again, Stark. I said, Is there a reason you started a bar brawl at Shandy's on a busy Friday night," Fury says.

"Whoah, whoah," Tony says, because that is just so fucking unfair. "What makes you think I had anything to do with it?"

"Maybe because you paid for their new furniture and three top of the line pool tables to be delivered, along with a contracting team to fix a broken bar top."

"That proves *nothing*." Tony pushes a button on his phone and some hollographic images pop up of a potential villainous lair.

"Stark, the Avengers Initiative cannot handle any additional bad press. I need you to--"

"Sir." Steve's going into parade rest while sitting, which is just--unnatural. "The incident was not Stark's fault."

Tony narrows his eyes. It wasn't, but he's not going to let Steve hang out to dry. "I took care of it. There will be no bad press."

Fury's looking at Steve, ignoring Tony now. "Really."

"Sir." It's the soldier's answer to everything, apparently.

"Is that a 'Sir I know who is responsible for the damages' or a 'Sir, I'm not at liberty to say', Captain?"

Yeah, Tony knew Fury was going to be pissed, but come on, the whole team has been good for weeks. It's not like they knocked over a 7-11. "Look--"

"It's a Sir, I started that brawl, Sir." Steve says, looking straight at the wall.

Tony covers his eyes with one hand. The glorious beautiful loyal idiot. "It was a misunderstanding."

But Fury's ignoring Tony and staring at Steve. "You're telling me that Captain America *started* a bar brawl at a shady pool hall?"

"Sir, yes, Sir."

Barton, that jerk, is laughing. "What the hell happened? Were they out of apple pie?"

Steve's gaze doesn't waver one bit. He doesn't answer, but his cheeks are flushed.

Tony decides to save him, because honestly, he can't take this. "I'm pretty sure I've found where the Furminator's hideout is."

Fury holds up one huge hand at Tony, like he's saying 'bad dog no'. "Agent?"

Natasha walks in. "Witnesses state that a man fitting the Captain's description started the fight after one Cameron James made a pass at his date."

"His date. Do we have a description?"

Natasha reads off from a report she's holding. "A very fine piece of ass. I couldn't blame Cameron for making a play, but I couldn't blame the blond dude from shutting him down, either."

Tony watches Cap's cheeks turn darker pink even as his eyes go hard. Interesting. No matter how many pheromones Cap's pouring off, and boy is he ever, he remains still as a statue, gaze still fixed at that same point two inches above Fury's shoulder.

"Do we have any description more specific, agent?"

"Let's see," Natasha goes on. "More about how nice his ass was. Ah yes, here we go. Short, dark hair, masculine omega, apparently a real handful when riled."

Tony leans back in his chair, rocking it slightly. What the hell was he supposed to do? Let some damn Brooklyn assholes attack Captain America?

"The general consensus seems to be that the date was beautiful enough to start a fight over." Natash reads over her notes. "There's some more here about his probable wildness in bed, but short, dark hair, masculine omega is about the best I could do."

"And I wonder, *Captain*," Fury says sharply, "if you could make any possible deductions as to who that description might fit."

"I really could not say, Sir." Cap's voice is level and flat, military perfect.

"You couldn't, or you won't?"

"Sir." A muscle is now jumping in Cap's jaw. "The fight was entirely my responsibility and my fault. Sir."

"Really. Even though it was started over your date."

Tony swivels his chair back and forth. Cap said Fury knew, but apparenlty not. Does Cap not want to admit this publicly? No, it's clear as day that everyone knows exactly who was in that bar. Maybe Steve just hates Fury's BS as much as he does. And--maybe Steve's just doing exactly what he said he would do. Take the responsibility.

"Sir," Cap says, voice tight. "The responsibility is mine alone."

"Stark?" Fury asks, eye hard on him.

"Whatever the Captain says." Tony's not going to push, and in an odd little way, it's nice for someone else to just take Fury's ire for a change.

The sudden wash of protective, affectionate, aroused pheromones from Steve is a really pleasant bonus.

"Look, do you want the Furminator's address or not?" Tony says, because as much fun as it is to watch Steve shield him, enough is enough with Fury. The man can go on a meaningless rant about appropriate behavior all damn day. "Speak now or I'm deleting this address."

Fury wants the address, of course.

*

After the meeting, Tony gets stuck at SHIELD headquarters working to locate the damn villain's other stockpiles. He staggers straight into the private elevator on his way to his bedroom at 2 fucking am, because fucking Fury. It's always one thing or another with that guy.

Tony should go say thank you to Steve for the save during the meeting, but he's going to bed instead. It's stupid, it's self destructive, it's probably cruel. Tony's shoulder hits the doorway when he turns, and he almost falls, but he rights himself, staggers onward.

He will not tell Steve about this latest dizzy spell. No good could come of it.

Besides, for once in his fucking life he wants to pretend to have a normal goddamn relationship with someone he actually likes. If that makes him stupid, so be it. He's done worse.

Chapter 55

Steve should feel guilty about the brawl. He really should. But he doesn't. Steve knows darn well that Tony had thoroughly enjoyed mixing in, and it had been, well, almost fun to watch Tony fight.

OK, no 'almost' about it.

With the stakes so small, Steve wasn't truly worried for Tony's life, no matter how many bar patrons waded in. Tony was small, just a little fella, but he more than made up for that in ferocity. Also, Tony fought dirty.

Very dirty.

He pulled hair, he punched people right in the nuts, he went for the eyes and the knees and the kidneys, he bit anyone who was stupid enough to get their hand near his face. There was something almost like dancing the way Tony could sweep someone off their feet with one kick, then flow around to smash the flat of his hand against someone else. And his eyes--the bright sparkle as he judged odds, chose where to move, when to retreat, when to attack.

Steve had been enchanted. The suit kept Tony safe, but it also masked his movements, hid his eyes, his expressions. Sure, Steve has watched Tony spar before, but this was different, uncontrolled, wild.

Real.

It had taken everything Steve had to not give in to just kissing the man senseless in the midst of all the broken tables and spilled drinks.

On the ride home, Tony had kept up a low grumbling rant against the back of Steve's neck. Sure, Steve had gotten hard riding his bike before, but having Tony Stark plastered against his back muttering curses and inventive insults added a whole new something.

Despite that, Steve knew he had to stick to his battle plan. He was a strategist, a tactician, and if he bedded Tony on their first (or second or even third) date, Steve would cede ground he couldn't afford to lose. Tony didn't hear words, not really, not about this. Not about sex.

So Steve had kissed him in the kitchen until they were both panting and desperate, and then he'd left.

As Steve walked down the hallway to his room, his enhanced hearing told him exactly what Tony'd gotten up to once he'd gone. The soft rustle of cloth, the panting breaths, the quick little bitten off moan.

Lying in his own bed, the smell of Tony still on his hands, Steve touched himself.

Waiting was the right thing to do--far too many people had told Tony that the endgame was just this, just the sex, and Steve had absolutely no intention of sending that message. But god, the way Tony'd gone boneless and trusting and pliant during their kiss. Steve held his left hand near his nose to recapture the scent of him while his right hand gave his cock a last few tugs. Just the hint of iron, cologne, warmth were enough to send him right over, imagining Tony's hand on top of his own on his cock.

That night, Steve slept deeper than he had since waking from the ice.

*

On their next date, Steve had taken Tony to lunch. A simple, quiet little food cart in the financial district. They'd eaten their food on a bench in a park-like church yard. Tony's appetite was still lousy, but he'd seemed to enjoy tasting everything. Steve asked about Tony's projects, shared a few stories from his most recent counseling homework assignments, talked about the drawing class he was thinking of taking through the adult education center.

Every now and again, Tony would go quiet. He'd look up at Steve through his bangs, sharp, uncertain. The same look Steve had seen on the children who'd crept close to their campfires in France. Hungry, feral, unsure, ready to bolt.

Steve did what he'd done back then. He kept his body soft, looked at the trees and the squirrels and the beauty around him, made sure his hands stayed low near his center mass, made no quick movements. Ignored the staring, let Tony look his fill, see whatever Steve's body might tell him. Open.

The third time it happened, Steve broke a small bite off his own food, held it out, as though absently, still not looking, just waiting. It was a small piece of cookie, rich with butter and pecans, almost toffee-flavored.

After a long pause, Steve felt it, a brush like butterfly wings against his fingers, and the food was gone.

When Steve finally risked a glance, Tony was looking down at his own food, poking it with his fork. That meant nothing, but the slight loss of tension in those strong shoulders meant--everything.

Steve holds onto that memory, that tiny fluttering touch, the brush of warmth. Courting Tony will never be easy, but it will be worth it.

*

Unfortunately, there hasn't been much time to talk--some idiot with more technology than sense tried to hack the New York Stock Exchange and a trio of SHIELD agents had appeared from nowhere to hustle Tony to the scene of fiscal carnage.

Steve hasn't seen Tony alone since. Tony's gone to meetings with the SEC, Wall Street moguls, and the FBI.

This morning a strange man Steve strongly suspects is the Federal Reserve chairman has breakfast in their kitchen. Steve had come in from his run, taken a look at the beautifully arranged scones and breakfast pastries on the table and felt an odd surge of emotion. Not a one of those things had been cooked by Tony. Steve could just tell.

Tony leaned against the counter in his usual place, but there was no Sunday morning cigarette, no battered pair of half-buttoned jeans, no tangled curls. Tony was picture-perfect in suit and tie, silk pocket handkerchief, shoes shined to a turn.

"I'll see what I can do," Tony said, in the tones of one making a concession.

The Fed chairman let out a sigh of relief. "I appreciate it, Stark. We won't forget this."

Tony nodded, still quiet. After a moment, he straightened from his comfortable hip-cocked pose, and the chairman stood.

"Thank you again. Sincerely," the chairman said, giving Tony a deferential nod, an absent polite social smile to Steve. "I'll just see myself out."

Steve watched him go. Since waking up, there were times the world would shift, go fuzzy and out of focus, then snap back into sight sharper than before.

That man, a powerful American political and financial figure, had recognized Captain America, Steve was sure of it. But to the Federal Reserve chairman, Steve was a pleasant anomaly, not someone to consider seriously, alien invasion or no.

Tony Stark, on the other hand, was a man to respect. Not Iron Man, Steve was sure. Tony himself.

A constant puzzle, his Tony. The closer Steve got, the more he realized he didn't know, and the more he wanted to find out.

*

By the time Steve's finishes his post-training op shower, it's time for poker. It's a casual affair, so it won't matter if Steve's a few minutes late. He can be dealt into the next hand. Steve likes to be on time, though, likes to choose his favorite seat so he can watch Tony's hands as he builds a bridge with the cards, likes to hear Tony talk about the various liquors as he offers up his bar to the team.

Tonight, Tony's offering different bottles to Phil. "You'll like this one," Tony says, setting a dark brown bottle on the table. "It's from a small Caribbean island. It's sweeter, almost caramel, from the cane sugars."

Phil pours a small swallow into a tumbler, sips. His eyes look startled, and Tony laughs. "Good, right?"

"Very."

Tony sets Natasha's vodka bottle at her place. It's already covered in condensation from the freezer, and the liquor moves thick as syrup inside. Tony told him that in Russia, they just stick the bottles outside in the snow, but that it can backfire. If the temperature gets too cold, the vodka will ice-burn your throat when you have a shot.

Steve figures that fits Natasha's tastes well enough. She'd like a liquor that could bite without warning.

"And for our resident Captain," Tony says, setting what looks like a wine bottle down at Steve's place. Instead of a cork, it has a simple screw on lid.

There's no label, and Steve picks up, turns it around. Tony's eyes are laughing, a dare. Steve pours a shot into his tumbler, knocks it back, blinks at the burn, smiles when it turns to mellow heat almost instantly.

"What is this?" Steve asks, surprised and pleased.

Tony pours himself a few fingerfuls of Scotch. "Boggs Little Creek Special."

"Please tell me that's not bootlegged," Phil says wearily.

"Would I buy illegal goods?" Tony asks, hand over his heart.

Barton just laughs. "Better to ask whether you'd sell them. Or maybe I should say barter with them."

Tony's eyes are laughing right back. "I'm shocked at you, Clint. To suggest I might have illegal goods to trade, especially those of a chemical nature. Shocked, truly shocked."

There's a joke here that Steve's not getting, but it doesn't bother him. He pours another fingerful of the whiskey. The tiniest warmth in his belly is telling him that it's just possible he might be able to get a little effect from this stuff.

Phil just shakes his head at the lot of them, opens the first pack of cards, even as Natasha slides into her place at the table.

*

Steve should have expected it, he really should have. By the second bottle of Boggs Little Creek Special, he's actually a little tipsy.

When Natasha turns out to win the pot with two pair, Steve stares in shock. "Holy shit, you were bluffing with that crap?"

Across the table, Tony's eyes dance in the light of his cigarette. "Such language at my table, Steven."

Steve grins, shakes his head. "Your own fault, Stark."

"How many bottles of this stuff do you have?" Clint asks, his own eyes gleaming.

"As many as could fit in the trunk of my car," Tony tells him.

Clint hoots in appreciation, and Phil covers his face with his hands. "No, Clint. *No*."

"Hey! I haven't even told you my villainous plot."

"I know as much as I need to--you can't dump a trunkful of Kentucky moonshine in SHIELD's systems to get Fury drunk. Or the president. Or me."

"What about that upcoming Senatorial hearing?" Barton asks. Phil's been fretting over the congressional hearings about SHIELD for days already.

Tony talks around his cigarette absently, shuffles the cards. "I could get you a truckbed for that party, free gratis. They hate the revenuers, always have done. Nothing they'd like better than for those ATF-funding assholes to drop their pants in public on a long drunk."

"Very funny," Phil says, from behind his hands. "Ha ha."

"Wasn't kidding." Tony deals cards out to everyone, smiles sharp as a shark at his own hand. "So, now that we're all appropriately relaxed--Tasha, what's this I hear about the Russians letting us Os play in the military sandbox?"

Clint looks up. "I thought that was only for specialist teams."

Natasha rearranges her cards. "It's for specialist grade teams, scouting teams, recon, and close support teams. There's a limit of four Os to each team."

"How big are the teams?" Steve asks, pouring himself a bit more liquor. He really shouldn't indulge, but it's fun to just be normal for a change. Have a bit of a drink that Tony arranged special. Enjoy his team.

"They top up at twenty maximum, but they're trying to keep them to around six to ten. It's not quite going according to plan, but there's been some underground rumbling that the RAF and the Canadians are going to offer additional support in setting things up."

Everyone puts in their bids, and by the next round, Steve throws in his hand. He rests his chin on his fist, thinking about it. The Russians he'd known back in the war had been good fighters, very fierce, but what he's learned of Communism makes him a little leery of official organizing of omega teams.

Maybe some of that shows on his face, maybe not.

Tony knocks back more Scotch, bids outrageously, then says, "How are they picking the Os?"

Natasha eyes the pot, then Tony, meets his bid. "They're not. They set it up so that a team of alpha-betas can create an opening. Advertise what they're looking for. Any interested omega can volunteer to join that team, pending pre-approval by the Army for security checks. It's not like the old days."

Steve pours more into his glass, doesn't say a word.

"Hmm," Tony says.

"Seems like a major fucking security risk to me," Clint says. "Advertising who your recon teams are? Nuts."

"They use aliases, but you're right, it's not perfect. Mostly, they're trying to get civilian omegas with good training to apply to go through a background check so they can have their pick of teams to join, if they want."

Steve watches Phil quietly win the hand, take the chips.

"That's going to end badly," Steve says into the silence.

Tony settles back into his chair in a low slouch, arms spread, like a king on a throne. A long tendril of smoke is obscuring his eye. "Because?"

Steve picks up the deck of cards, begins shuffling. "One of these days, those teams are going to realize the stakes. They'll catch a smell of an O they especially want, they'll figure out they can't compete fairly, there's too many studs jockeying, and they'll fight."

"Sounds nasty," Clint says. "Thought that's why they outlawed it in the first place."

"Nope." Steve tosses cards to everyone. "They outlawed it because too many omegas were taking high-paid skilled tech positions from so-called more worthy betas. Or so the academic articles Tony gave me say. You got any more of this stuff, Stark?"

Tony just reaches behind him without looking, sets another bottle on the table. "You've seen a cross-team fight."

"I have." Steve sets the deck down, checks his own cards. "Lost two British squads that way. Command sent down some sweet young things to get the boys going, didn't think things through. Someone up high thought a little friendly competition would sort out some morale problems. Turns out that if you up the pressure on morale problems...." Steve just shrugs.

Everyone at the table is silent, and Barton looks kind of queasy.

"Sounds like grade-A physics to me. Apply enough pressure, provide no outlet, things go boom." Tony throws his hand, which is unlike him. "So, is that how it normally works?"

Ah. So that's why Tony brought this up. "No. Usually, it's a little more personal. People aren't just animals, even in combat, and no matter what the history books say, very few omegas go into heat during tragic attacks on their homelands in front a strong alpha who just happens to be passing by. If you want an omega for your team, you court one."

"Is that so?" Tony says, meeting his eyes squarely. "The whole team, or just the chief alpha?"

"Depends on the team," Steve says, meeting his gaze. "Depends on whether the omega in question is being courted for them all or just one."

"Isn't it usually a group fuck in a pack?" Tony's eyebrows really are too expressive.

"No." Steve throws in his own cards. He refuses to get defensive about this, and he knows exactly how things turned out for all the Commandos under his command. "A true pack is formed around a breeding pair. One alpha, one omega, and their assorted adult relations to raise that pair's children. It's not unusual for a highly skilled or wealthy pack to have an additional omega, or for one of the children to be pack-sired, but the basic form of the pack is grouped around the breeding pair."

"How very Animal Planet," Tony says, eyes narrowed. "Seems like the other adults would feel like they're missing out."

Steve sips his drink, crosses his ankles under the table. "A lot of them pair up among themselves for that."

"And that's enough." Tony's words drip derision and disbelief. "They leave the omega entirely alone, just because."

"I didn't say that." Steve refills his glass, enjoys the warm burn. "But if the leader wants breeding rights kept to himself, he'll usually make consequences quite clear. Used to be perfectly legal to defend those rights under military law. To the death, if necessary."

"That's still legal in international waters," Phil puts in. He bids high enough to make Natasha pause, but she stays in. "A SEAL team killed a couple of civilian contractors who made a play, oh, two months or so ago."

Steve knocks back his glass, splashes more in. He doesn't say anything, but what he's thinking must show on his face, because Tony's eyes are glittering with interest.

"You think they deserved it," Tony says quietly.

Steve shrugs. "I think they should have known better than to go for a SEAL team's omega."

*

Dating Tony is exhausting. Steve loves it, loves each moment they spend together, but it's like dancing with constant temptation.

Steve has promised himself not to give in to sex, not yet. Everything he's learned about Tony's world, everything Tony himself has said, tells Steve that sex is the main endgame for Tony's past relationships. Usually the only endgame.

So Steve sidles around it, tries his best to keep the tactical advantage, but it's like wrestling with gravity, fighting against physics, denying nature. Steve wants to wrap himself around Tony and kiss until the stars fall from the sky. He wants to slam Tony against the wall of the elevator and make love to him until the world ends. He wants to lay him down on the grass in the park so they can learn each other inside out with hands and mouths and fevered touches.

In the beginning, it starts with Steve taking Tony places. Little hole in the wall restaurants for the occasional dinner, Battery Park to feed the pigeons and watch the ferries, wandering

through old cemeteries to look at the statues.

Tony doesn't seem to know quite what to make of it, but he almost always agrees to go, a soft expression in his eyes. His refusals are few and spoken with genuine regret.

Steve avoids going to any galas or parties or fancy events of any kind. Tony still goes, dressed to the nines in bespoke suit and perfect tie, hair styled, shoes gleaming.

Sometimes, just before Tony leaves for a fancy evening out, he'll wander to the living room, make himself a drink, sit and talk with Steve for just a bit.

Steve carefully doesn't ask about his plans, doesn't stay up late to meet him when he comes home, doesn't check him over at breakfast.

At times, before he leaves, Tony will fall quiet, his hand holding a crystal tumbler full of scotch and ice, watching Steve, just watching. Waiting, perhaps.

Steve never knows what to say at these times, can't bear to lie to Tony outright that the sex with others doesn't matter, but can't risk telling him Steve would rather Tony stay home where it's safe, where no one else will ever touch him.

One night, Tony sits back, elbows propped on the couch arm, watching Steve again. "You haven't said a word."

"No," Steve agrees. They're not discussing the silence, but the cause for it.

"You aren't going to?"

"No," Steve says quietly.

Tony looks at his Scotch, rattles the ice against the glass, looks at the wall. Absently, he knocks the rest of the drink back. "Got the price of the Brooklyn rebuild down another 12 mill."

"I'm glad," Steve says, grateful for the change of subject until he watches the muscle in Tony's jaw jump.

"I wonder if you really are," is all Tony says. He sets his glass down on the coffee table, stands up.

"Of course I'm really glad," Steve says, confused again, but Tony only shakes his head.

"Tony?" Steve asks.

"Don't worry about it."

Then Tony's gone again. The next morning, he's still gone. Steve hates it, but what can he say?

Nothing, that's what.

Two days later, Steve reads in the paper that Freeman and Edwards, two of the bidders on Brooklyn's road reconstruction, have reduced their bids by another 8% and change. Steve considers mentioning it to Tony, but decides against it. Tony probably already knows.

Chapter 56

The team's on the Hellicarrier for another damn all day Initiative session. Tony's half-buried in an engine, stuck up a ladder, since Fury didn't need him for all the meetings. Tony's got his left arm stuck deep inside a heavy tube of not-quite PVC flexible pipe, trying to find the fucking goddamn problem that the fucking goddamn mechanical techs have been missing, when he just feels it.

The air is suddenly filled with ozone, sharp and high, like a sunny day right before a crashing storm.

Tony looks around. It's not Thor, because he's still stuck in Asgard, and besides, it's a scent, not an actual barometric change.

He sees it from his position on the ladder--across the wide expanse of hanger bay, the techs, airmen, soldiers, guards, all scatter away from the single figure, striding purposefully across the floor.

It's Cap, of course, but Tony's startled. Steve had been in a fine mood this morning, mellow enough to give him a shy kiss on the cheek before they left. Now, he looks thunderous--all the more deadly because he's not moving in any hurry.

It's absolutely obvious to everyone, however, that he will not be gainsaid from whatever he's after.

Tony pulls himself out of the engine, wipes his face with his shirt-sleeve.

"Na Stark," a tech says, near him on the rolling ladder. "Na Stark, should I...?"

What? Tony wonders. Call the marines because the Captain's seriously fucking pissed and he's coming straight for him? Yeah, that'll help. "Go," Tony says, voice low and hard.

"But--are you sure?"

"Go," Tony says again, because someone has made the mistake of stepping in front of the good Captain, and yes, without breaking stride, Cap's just picked the guy up and set him to one side. "This is not in your job description."

The tech looks down, eyes the Captain, and scrambles away to safety. He's got to be able to smell it, too, the scent of fear from everyone else, the scent of pure fury from the Captain. The look in Cap's eyes of barely leashed rage.

Tony slowly walks down the stairs of the ladder and pauses on the second step. "Steven. What's--"

That look in Steve's eyes makes his words falter. Oh hell.

The leash is slipping free, and Cap's control is failing. Tony can see it. He remembers Cap's story of coming off a bad mission, of needing to bury himself in a warm body, take, just for a moment, what was his right.

The hairs on the back of Tony's neck are standing on end. He's pretty sure that if he doesn't protest now, Cap's going to fuck him right here in the hanger bay.

Tony knows it's a terrible, horrible, no good very bad idea, but damn. It's also pretty hot.

He cocks his hips, swaggers down the last step. "Hello, gorgeous. What's got you all riled up?"

Some suicidal airman--no, Army, Tony sees the insignia, what an absolute idiot, is the guy nuts?--grabs Cap's arm and is trying to hold on and talk to him. Cap's just striding the last few feet to Tony, ignoring the dude like he's a buzzing fly. No, not ignoring. Not completely.

When the guy says, "And of course, we've asked for Na Stark to do the initial--"

Cap turns and *snarls*, teeth bared an inch from the guy's face. That sends the idiot scrambling back. He falls on his butt, crabs walks backwards, and then he's no longer Tony's problem, because Steve's lifted Tony up and slammed him against the engine housing and he's got his tongue down Tony's throat and he's tongue fucking him as lewd as any porn star, and Tony can do nothing but hang on and moan, because wow, Rogers, you are good at that.

Tony isn't good at being completely still though, not when he's got all this lovely beautiful man to climb like a goddamn tree. He's got one leg curled around Steve's ass and the other hooked around his ankle and both arms twined around his neck and back, holding on for dear life as Steve thrusts against him, cock a long glorious line under those truly horrible khaki pants.

Then Steve pulls back and Tony lunges forward, trying to recapture Steve's mouth, because you cannot possibly stop now, for Christ's sake.

But Steve's eyes are clouded, angry, hurt.

It makes Tony's stomach ache. He's out of breath, but he's not always a jerk. "Steven?"

Steve drops his head on Tony's shoulder, and Tony strokes his hair. It's always surprisingly soft, baby fine and light, because Steve never learned to use product and Tony likes to pet it.

"Shh, baby, you're OK, I've got you," Tony says, almost crooning. Steve's shaking, and Tony really has no idea what's going on. Steve's pheromones are off the charts. Full of Fight and possession and sex and fear. "Shhh. Shhh, I've got you, Steven."

Steve makes a noise at his name--want and desperation both. He tips his head and his mouth latches against Tony's neck, as far back as he can reach, and his teeth are scraping the ultra-sensitive skin there and his tongue is laving gently right after. Tony's eyes roll back in his

head and he goes completely boneless and nearly slides right off Steve to the ground, except Steve's holding him up now.

Tony's never been so wet in his life. He's tipping his head back, baring his throat more, and whining desperately. If Steve doesn't fuck him right now, Tony's pretty sure he will die.

"Can't," Steve says, against Tony's neck.

"*Can*," Tony insists. He adds a suggestive roll of his hips against Steve's leg for emphasis. At least that gets him Steve's mouth on him again, sucking lewdly at a spot on Tony's neck that is now hot and oversensitive.

"Huh-uh," Steve says, nibbling.

And Christ, it hurts, like nothing else, but it's the kind of pain that Tony loves, and Steve must know it, because he's not stopping, even though Tony's head is thrashing back and forth helplessly. He's begging and mindless and oh god, Steve, please.

"You need it too," Tony says, accusing. "Don't be such a dick, Steve. It's not fair, getting me like this, then leaving me hanging. This is your fault, do something."

Steve is laughing against Tony's neck now, warm and bright, but that dark undertone is still there. "My fault, huh."

"Jesus *fuck*," Tony says, because Steve's shifted his grip and now Tony's desperate thrusting against Steve's thigh is giving him absolutely perfect friction on his cock.

"Is that better, Tony?" Steve croons, and then he bites down hard on Tony's neck, and Tony whites out and comes so hard he can't see or hear.

When Tony comes down enough to even know what the hell has happened, Steve's still holding him against a damn engine housing. There's probably grease in his hair, but Tony could not give a shit. He's completely boneless, and Steve's hands are the only thing holding him up. Steve's mouth is alternating between biting down on that same spot and then sucking on it, and it's making Tony's aftershocks almost painful, they're so intense.

"Jesus, baby, Steve, enough, I can't."

"You could if I wanted you to," Steve says, voice so soft only Tony's going to be able to hear. "But I'll slow down. You were so good for me."

The praise is heady and sharp, but Tony's really trying here, so he ignores it as best he can. "You want to tell me what the hell's going on?"

"No," Steve says absently, licking a path up to Tony's jaw.

Yeah, OK, Tony can kind of see his point. They have better things to do right now.

"No, it's not that. It's just--I'll get mad again. I need to calm down."

"You came to me," Tony says, realization sharp and clear. "That's what you're doing here. You're not mad at me. You're--"

"I'm burying my anger *in* you, yes," Steve agrees, and he's kissing the scars on Tony's neck, which is always a sure fire distraction. Tony wants to shove at Steve's shoulder. Tell him to quit it. But he doesn't.

"I can calm you down," Tony says. He can, he knows it, and he's surprised to realize that he doesn't even mind it. This is something he can give Steve. Wants to give him.

"I am not fucking you against an engine for our first time," Steve says sharply. "Don't even think about it."

"Well, you know how I feel about a nice big engine."

"*Anthony*."

"Pff, I'm just saying. To some of us, tech is actually sexy. Are you telling me you can't even talk about why you're mad yet?"

Steve doesn't answer, which is, yes, an answer. The sharp rise of the scent of ozone is reply enough.

Tony's really not averse to just being held here, kissed boneless, given the occasional frottage orgasm, but he's pretty sure it won't do much to cool Steve off. In fact, it could seriously backfire, if anyone is stupid enough to approach them. As much as Tony loves Steve's hands on him, loves that Steve lost it enough to just come to him, Tony knows Steve would hate himself for losing control and hurting anyone.

There's a better-than-good chance that if Steve really did lose control again, if someone did interrupt them, then the person who Steve hurt would be Tony. Tony's had enough rough fucks that he knows it's hardly going to kill him to be taken on the floor, even if concrete is hard on the knees, but Steve's such a softie he'll get upset.

No, Tony needs to help Steve out with this, and he's pretty sure he can. "Baby, I need you to trust me."

Steve sucks harder on his favorite spot in answer. Tony's eyes roll back in his head, because damn that's like--yes, wait, no getting distracted. He thumps on Steve's head with his fist, gently. "Steven."

"Tony. I like this."

"Yes, I know." Tony knows Steve has a thing for his neck, and hey, while he'd normally be all over the hickey, he has a better idea. "I'm going to help you out here, baby. Let me. So when the generals come to look at your table of maps, they get the right idea, not the wrong one, OK?"

He gets a low grumble for his trouble, a thoughtful nip to his collarbone.

Good enough.

"You'll love it, I promise. But you have to let me down. Just for a second, OK?"

That gets him a louder grumble, but Steve complies. Tony slides to his knees before Steve can realize what he's up to. It's not hard to get Steve's buckle undone, but his hands are shaking when he gets Steve's fly down. He's wanted his hands on Steve's cock for, well, forever.

Tony's completely surprised to feel a gentle hand stroke through his hair, but Steve isn't stopping him.

Steve's other hand is cupping Tony's jaw. Tony mouths Steve's hard dick through the cotton of his underwear. It's beautiful, he knows, because Steve is the pinnacle of human perfection, and Tony's a size queen, and yes, Steve's plenty big. God, he wants this.

Tony's hands pull Steve's underwear down enough, but he's not going to manage much more, because he hears the low underlying growl of an alpha very near the breaking point. Tony loosens his throat, opens his mouth, and slides down on Steve's cock.

The hand in his hair tightens to the point of pain, and Steve's hips jerk forward. Unconsciously, Tony's sure, but he was ready for it. Likes it. He's got his hands on Steve's hips, and he's guiding Steve to fuck his mouth, and Steve's resisting, so Tony inhales through his nose, slides all the way down until his nose is pressed against Steve's belly, and then he hums.

Steve lets out a choked off cry, and then he's finally, finally, fucking Tony's mouth and throat, curious fingers on Tony's face to feel where he's entering Tony's mouth, to feel the way Tony's cheek hollows, to rub against Tony's spit-slick lips. Tony is moaning in earnest, because he really has always enjoyed sucking cock, and he feels like a helpless slut, taking Steve in his mouth in public, at work, in front of a bunch of military personnel, and he's sure as anything that there is absolutely zero chance that Fury will even say one word to Tony about this, except maybe Thank You.

Tony loosens his throat again, because he really does have no gag reflex, and Steve is thrusting harder. Tony can feel Steve's cock stiffening, knows what's coming, and god, he is absolutely certain that this is the right thing to do.

Tony knows he wouldn't be able to do this if it was anyone but Steve, but this is Steve, so when Tony feels Steve's balls draw up, feels the first shudders of Steve's climax deep in his throat, he shoves hard on Steve's hips to push him back, and then Tony's nuzzling Steve's cock with his mouth, rubbing his cheeks and chin against the tip, letting Steve come on his face, and then he tilts his head back, letting the last of it hit his neck.

The low gutteral growl Steve makes is *completely worth it*.

When it's over, Steve slumps over, curled protectively over Tony. Tony keeps his hands on Steve's hips, because actually, he feels a little shaky himself. But he has one thing left he really wants to do.

With one hand, Tony slides his hand down his own jeans, into his underwear, beneath his cock, until his fingers are buried inside himself and covered in slick.

Steve's panting into his hair, shivering from aftershocks, but he doesn't protest when Tony arches back, raises his head for a kiss. Steve's mouth is warm, soft, gentle.

Tony watches his face, brings his fingers close, and he's thrilled to see Steve's pupils blow wide. "Hold still."

Steve doesn't move, but he's tight as a bow string again, vibrating with tension. Tony keeps eye contact the whole time, and slowly, sensually, drags his slick-wet fingers over the pulse point on Steve's neck. Marking.

"Jesus, Tony."

"Told you I could make you see god if you took me to bed," Tony says, but his voice is fond, low. It's heady, making Steve's eyes darken like that. "Feeling better, Steven?"

Steve slides down to his knees and rests his head on Tony's shoulder. "Yeah."

Tony can smell that the Fight is gone, but the possessive pheromones and the wash of sex are still heady. "Good."

"I can't believe you just handled me like that."

"I told you. I'm not afraid of you."

"*I'm* afraid of me."

Tony just shrugs. "What happened, baby?"

Steve sighs into Tony's neck, and then Tony is shocked when Steve bites down hard on that spot again, hard enough to bruise. Tony's mind go near-white with pleasure-pain and he's panting, needy, helpless again. Then Steve's pulling back enough to lick that spot, nuzzle his neck.

"Can you come just from this?" Steve asks curiously. "From my mouth on you?"

Tony's words are off line, so he just pants helplessly in what he hopes is some kind of helpful way.

"Hmm," Steve says, "looks like it. But I don't want to do that to you, not here, when others can see."

Tony whines, because please, don't fucking stop, you bastard.

Steve's not that much of a jerk, though, because he's kissing Tony again. Warm, open-mouthed reassuring kisses. Tony's head is tipped back, and Steve's rubbing the come into Tony's skin, and OK, Tony can definitely get behind that.

Steve's also undoing Tony's jeans, sliding his hand inside, cupping Tony's cock. Tony makes a surprised noise, because doesn't Steve want to fuck? He smells like fucking, and Tony's so wet and ready, he'd be happy to, but Steve's just gripping Tony's cock like he knows just what to do, then he bites down again, even harder, and he strips Tony's cock with one big hand while the other hand holds Tony close. Tony shakes and trembles and comes, helpless and undone.

When it's over, Steve licks the come off his own hand, watching Tony the whole time he does it.

That makes Tony's cock twitch, but he's come way too hard to do anything like get an erection again so soon.

When Steve's done, he carefully tucks Tony's cock away, does his jeans back up, tidies Tony's clothes. Then he does up his own pants. The whole time he's got one hand on Tony's back, supporting him, making sure Tony doesn't slide into a heap on cold concrete the way Tony's body honestly kind of wants to do.

At last, Steve's done, and Tony tucks his nose against Steve's shoulder. He's blissed out, exhausted. Steve smells like Tony's sex, and it's strange to smell the warm iron over the fresh-sunlight smell of Steve. "What the hell made you so pissed off?"

Steve holds Tony closer for a minute, then pulls away, leaning forward so their foreheads are touching. "General Ross wanted Banner arrested on charges."

Oh.

"He's also got a project that involves you, and he got the Army to sign off on assigning you to him."

Steve's fingers are digging into Tony's shoulders. It's a little worrying, actually, because Steve's usually so careful. "Steven, you know I wouldn't go off with Ross. I'm a civilian, he doesn't have any hold over me."

"The WSC is making a recommendation to Fury that you should be handed over to Ross on a contingency basis, just until the project is completed."

Well. Tony's opening his mouth, because that's ugly, but Fury has his methods, and Fury fucking owes them.

"I won't let that happen." Steve's voice has dropped down to the tone he uses on missions, when he gives commands on the comm lines and expects to be obeyed or else.

"I don't think Fury-"

"You let me worry about Fury. You are *mine*."

OK then. Tony's eyes are suddenly watering with the rush of scent off Steve. "I smell like you. Remember?"

Steve ducks his head and gives Tony a lazy slow kiss. The man may reek of Fight again, but it doesn't seem to make him hurried in bed. Or on the floor, as the case may be. "Yes. *Mine*," Steve says.

Steve sniffs Tony's neck again, making sure, Tony assumes. Reassuring himself. Tony lets him because honestly, he is exhausted. Handling hard line alphas is a lot of work. Plus, he'd been up half the night working on new specs for this Hellicarrier fix. Tony curls into Steve's arms and yawns.

"We have a meeting," Steve says at last, drawing back.

"Don't wanna," Tony says.

"Come on, up."

Tony whines pathetically because he isn't sure he can stand. He may not have been fucked against an engine, but he did get his throat fucked pretty damn hard, and it's just too much effort to move. Steve, of course, just hauls him upright.

Tony staggers a little, but Steve steadies him. Then Steve's turning them, leading Tony back toward the door out of the hanger. To a bathroom, Tony hopes, and then the meeting, and then a bed. Please god, a bed. "Wanna sleep for a week," Tony mutters and if he's slurring his words, well, fuck it.

"Shh. Soon. Just a little more. Do this for me."

Tony yawns, lets Steve lead him, not really paying attention, and then they're in a meeting room. Fury's sitting at one side of the table, not the head. There's a lot of brass in here. Generals. Admirals. What Tony thinks might be the Deputy Head of the State Department. Before Tony can say anything, Steve's just guiding him into the room, pulling out a chair, sitting down. There's no empty seats next to him, the only chair that's left is the one Steve's just sat down in, but before Tony can decide whether he's supposed to just stand or leave or what, Steve's hauling him into his lap, and OK, it's kind of kinky, really, because Tony smells like a hooker right now, and he must look like a mechanic, which he is of course, but some days you kind of don't want to be covered in engine grease, and sitting in front of a bunch of guys blinged out with enough ribbons to decorate Arlington is probably one of those days.

Steve is pulling a folder closer to him, ignoring the stares and glares of every other man in the room. "I'm sorry for the delay, gentlemen. As I said, I needed to double check something. Where were we?"

"The World Security Council has decided--" Ross says.

"Recommended, not decided," Fury says.

"Fine. As I said, the World Security Council has recommended that Na Stark be loaned to us for--"

Steve flips another folder open, looking just like he's reading a report there, but with his other hands he tips Tony's head back so that Tony's sprawled half off his lap, neck bared to every eye in the room. Tony should protest, really, he should, because Steve's moving him around bodily and Tony's doing a pretty significant submissive display in front of some fairly scary people.

"I'm afraid that's not advisable at this time," Steve says. His thumb toys absently with what Tony discovers later is a truly impressive bite mark right on the tenderest spot of Tony's neck, currently still sticky with come, and it's not Tony's fucking fault if it feels so good that he moans, low and wanton, and tips his head back further.

There's an audible inhalation of breath in the room.

"Why not?" Ross snaps. "Because he's your plaything?"

"Yes," Steve says simply, reading another report. He runs his thumb over that spot again, and Tony's body obligingly loosens, goes wet, and his mouth moans hoarsely, and he must look like the biggest fucking slut in the world, sprawled on Steve's lap, head hanging off the side of the chair as Steve pets him. "But I think you could have Mr Jose Ramirez and Ms Heather Babcock. They're in the Corps of Engineers, and quite good."

"We need Stark," Ross snaps.

"I'm afraid Na Stark will remain here." Steve's thumb keeps up the gentle, beautiful toying, and Tony's lost. If Steve wants to show him off to a room full of brass, well, whatever, so long as he doesn't stop doing that. "We need him."

"*You* need him, you mean."

"I do like to keep him close." Steve looks up, eyes meeting Ross's over the table. Without breaking the deadlock of their gazes, Steve's hand slides through Tony's hair, tipping his head even further back, baring his throat even more.

Tony should feel nervous, afraid, because he's being shown off to a room full of people who do not like him, who want him, and who have some serious authority to back their goals. But all he feels is lust and safety and a strange lull of comfort, because there is just no way in hell Steve would let anyone here hurt him. He moans again, because god, Steve just moves him however the hell he wants to.

"I believe I understand the Captain's position," one of the Admirals says. "I get your point Ross, but be reasonable. You can't take an active duty man's omega like that. It's just not done."

"He's not--" Ross growls.

"Well, what do you want, a letter written in the sky saying property of Captain Steve Rogers?" asks one of the airmen. "I was happy to recommend Stark work on Project Rose, because he's got a hell of a mind. Hell, my men still wish he'd just go back to building

weapons because Hammertech fucking sucks. But I'm sure as hell not going to get in a pissing match with Captain America over a piece of ass."

"Stark can work on the project and still be that piece of ass," Ross snaps. "Hell, for all I care, he can pull a train in the mess hall!"

Tony's eyes are half-closed, but he winces, and he feels Steve tense.

"Ross, shut up," hisses one of the other generals. "Do it now, man."

Ross doesn't say anything, thank fuck, but Tony's still tense because Steve's poised tight as a wire. Tony opens his eyes, and Steve is staring at Ross with the intent expression of a coiled predator.

"Well," Fury says. "This has all been very interesting, gentlemen, but unless we'd like to re-enact some of the more exciting scenes from WWII, I think we can all agree that Jimenez and Babcock will be assigned to Ross's Project Rose pending DoD background checks."

There's a general murmur of hasty agreement. Suddenly, everyone seems to be getting up. Tony tries to straighten, because movement around him freaks him out, especially when it's a lot of alpha males, but Steve's hand is firm on his neck, and Tony subsides back down with low throaty moan, voice hoarse from the throat-fucking, still buzzed on Steve's scent.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony watches people leave. Predictably, Fury is the last to go. He stands in the doorway for a moment, but he's not-looking at Tony. Smart man, the director. He's carefully looking only at Steve. "Would you like me to lock this, Captain?"

"You don't need to, but thank you."

Fury smiles. That smile will never not be scary.

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

> Just wanted to say thank you again to my lovely readers. The comments on the last chapter are really fantastic and meaty. If you don't normally read comments, but you enjoy commentary, I highly recommend checking it out.
>
> This chapter may answer some of the questions, but, being me (heh), not all of them.

Tony wakes up slowly, warm all over, but feeling strange.

He's face down in a pillow, which is pretty familiar, but he's not hungover, which is less so. He's under the covers, which is also a little unusual, because unless he's in his private bedroom in a nest of blankets, he has too much tendency to slide to the side of the bed easing away from people in his sleep to stay under covers for any length of time.

There's a large hand running up and down his back, and a very large, very warm body snuggled up to his side--not on top of him, but close. Clothed.

Which Tony is not. At all.

Fucking hell.

He sits up all at once, looks around. He's in a bedroom, of all things, on the Hellicarrier. He can tell from the rivet pattern on the wall, but this is an actual double bed. What the hell?

There are a couple of photos in frames on the desk, and Steve's shield is of course resting against the night stand, and Steve's sprawled out, looking up at him, eyes soft, un-worried, like a sleepy lion. Steve's wearing one of those white tee shirts of his and sweatpants--sleeping clothes.

There's three small portholes, but all Tony can see is sky.

"What's wrong?" Steve asks, curious but not worried.

Tony shifts, just a little, but no, he's pretty sure they didn't actually fuck. God damn, he hates this. "Where are we?"

Steve sits up, too, slides one of those large hands up Tony's chest. Tony grabs him by the wrist, stopping him, still looking around. "Where are we?"

"My bedroom," Steve says, confused, but not as confused as Tony expects him to be. Jesus wept, he must have been completely out of it.

And, yes, the whole room does smell like Steve. The blankets smell like Steve, and Tony, well, Tony definitely smells like Steve. "You've been scent-marking me, huh."

Steve pulls his hand away from Tony's grip so he can readjust the covers around Tony. "Yes."

Tony looks down at himself and has to shut his eyes briefly. "Jesus Christ."

There's a line of precise marks down the line of his left arm, starting at the top of his shoulder, trailing down his bicep, all the way to his forearm, following the flow of his muscle. Each bite-mark is tiny and dark, precise, and it must have taken quite a while. Tony's feeling a little light headed when he rubs at his neck, which is, yes, more than a little sore. Here's hoping there isn't a goddamn stars and stripes pattern on his ass.

"Tony, what's wrong?" Steve asks. His brows are furrowed and it's his adorable confused puppy look.

"Steven," Tony says tightly, "this is very important. I need you to answer honestly and thoroughly. How long has this been your bedroom on the Hellicarrier?"

Steve's clearly figured out *something* is wrong. "Almost since I woke up. Five days later. Tony, what's wrong?"

"Motherfucking son of a bitch," Tony says, lunging for his clothes.

Steve gets up slowly from the bed, but he does seem to be looking for Tony's clothes, picking up a scattered sock and handing it over. Then Tony notices that Steve's used it as an excuse to get in front of the damn door, because Steve is really not as stupid as everyone thinks.

"How did this--I loved this shirt." Tony's staring at one of his oldest band shirts in dismay. It's ripped all the way down the front.

"You don't remember, do you?"

"Doesn't matter." Tony starts opening drawers. Surely Captain Plaid will have some kind of shirt he can wear, even if the smell will not help.

"Uh, yes, I kind of think it does." Steve's hand is on Tony's hip now.

Tony slips to the side, because he's still fucking naked, thank you very much. "Not now, Steven."

"Yes now. Why don't you remember getting here? Is this a side effect of the hormonal imbalance?"

"I said not now." Of course Rogers would freak about that, but Tony is getting a little close to the edge of panic. If he doesn't keep it together, he'll be flat on his back.

Again.

"*Tell me*."

Tony flinches. Steve's voice is low, fierce, not angry, but very dominant. "It happens sometimes, that's all."

"You just have *random memory loss*?" Steve's voice is incredulous, like Tony's nuts.

Tony slams the drawer full of neatly rolled socks shut. "Yes. It's called dissociative amnesia and it has nothing to do with my hormones. It doesn't happen in the field, so fucking let it go, all right?"

"When does it happen?" Steve's voice has switched to worry, and he sounds earnest and anxious.

"Not now." Tony is not going to get into it, and it's not any of Steve's business. He finds a stack of shirts and just takes the one on top. Tragically white, smelling of the Army's cheap-ass laundry detergent and Steve.

The next drawer has workout pants. There's no point trying to find a pair that will fit. They're all going to flap around his feet, but his jeans are a loss. Steve ripped the damn buttons off. He'd *liked* those jeans.

Steve's moved so he's leaning against the rounded door, and his arms are crossed. "What are you so upset about?"

"Going to keep me in here until I tell you?" Tony snaps, because he is fucking sick of being manipulated.

"No, but I think I have a right to know why you're so upset to wake up in my bed."

And that's--OK, that's fair. In a way. Tony gets that. "I'm not mad at you, Steven." Much, except over his Metallica tour shirt, fucking hell. "Did it never occur to you to wonder why you have a double bed on a Hellicarrier?"

"Well, I am Captain America," Steve says drily.

"Yeah, how about no." Tony's looking around for his boots. "The enlisted guys and the agents all sleep in sardine racks."

Steve picks up a boot and starts carefully knotting the broken laces back together. "Coulson has a room. I've seen it."

"Three feet by six, bed folds down, right?"

"Yes. It doubles as his office." Steve is working slowly, taking his time.

Tony makes quick work of the other boot. "Coulson gets it because he's bonded to Barton and he's Fury's right hand man. You don't have this bed because you're tall."

"Who normally has this bed, Tony?"

Tony grabs the boot from Steve's hands, shoves his feet in it. They're not fast-pull on combat boots, but they're close. "The Captain. Excuse me, I'll just be back in a bit."

But Captain Fucking America is not moving from the door. He's got his game face on, too. Hell. "Why do I have the Captain's room on the Hellicarrier?"

"Because I can't sleep with someone else in a small bed in an enclosed space. It's in my file." Tony pushes gently against Steve's arm, and Steve moves aside. "Excuse me, Steven. I mean it, I'll be back in a bit."

Steve lets him go, but Tony's last glimpse of him is of Steve frowning masterfully.

Yeah, *really* not as stupid as people assume.

*

Fucking Fury, is all Tony can think, later. He'd stormed in, and Fury hadn't even been surprised.

"Why hello, Stark. Hacked the passcode again."

"You had this planned the whole time, you bastard."

Fury flips a gray SHIELD folder shut, sets it aside. "Contrary to what you always seem to believe, my world does not actually revolve around you. What are you talking about?"

Tony slams both hands on Fury's desk until he's two inches from the man's face. "Steve knows. I just told him."

Aha. A tiny flicker of surprise, there and gone again. "Didn't think I would, did you?"

"You're not usually such a team player."

"Right. I'm not sure how he's going to react when he figures out you only let me on the team in order to give him a pretty little bride tied up in a bow. I just have one question."

Fury is still, in that menacing relaxed way he has. "Only one?"

"Yes. Was it my fortune you wanted control of? Or did you just want to make sure he had access to a quality piece of ass so he wouldn't rage out?"

Every tiny flicker of expression on Fury's face is a victory, and the muscle twitching at his jaw is a beautiful thing indeed. "Maybe I had other reasons."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, Nicky."

Tony's one of the few people with the engineering know-how to make a pressurized door slam. It's not nearly satisfying enough.

*

When Tony gets back to Steve's room (room! he doesn't even live on the damn Hellicarrier), Steve's sitting on a perfectly made bed. Tony's clothes are folded and laid on the nightstand.

"How did it go with Fury?" Steve asks quietly.

Tony looks around, wishing he could remember, well, anything after getting petted like a two dollar hooker in a room full of four star generals. "He did his usual stone pharaoh impression."

"But he didn't deny it," Steve says. He seems subdued, and he's picking at a seam on his sweatpants.

"Nope." Where would Tony's tools be? Probably back in the hanger bay.

"I didn't plan this," Steve says.

"Uh, pretty sure I never said you did." That just wouldn't be Steve. "I may have clinical paranoia, but I'm still a genius."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Most of the psych drugs don't work with my body type."

"Very funny. Are you going to leave?" Steve sounds so strained that Tony looks up from checking his pants pockets. He's not wearing torn jeans home in the suit, but he needs the stuff in the pockets.

"I'm going to do some thinking, that's all. No offense, but I need to be alone to do it."

"No, I get that. I meant, are you going to leave me. For good."

Tony leans against the wall, regards him seriously. "Would you even let me go?"

Steve looks down at his hands, and Tony watches a red blush work up his neck. "Yeah," Tony says quietly. "That's about what I thought."

"I'm sorry," Steve says.

"You're really not."

Steve doesn't answer, but he doesn't stop Tony from slipping from the room, either.

*

When Steve gets home, Barton's cleaning his arrows at the table they use for playing cards. Steve paces absently, still thinking.

"Somebody got lucky," Barton says.

"What?"

"Looks like you nailed Stark at last," Barton moves his chamois cloth slowly, a careful habit of years.

"No! Well, kind of."

"It's complicated. I gotcha."

Steve sits down in the chair and fools with some of the supplies on the table. "Director Fury gave me a double bed. On the Hellicarrier. When Stark woke up there, he was pretty upset."

"Sure." Barton eyes his arrow tip.

"You don't seem surprised at his reaction."

Barton looks at him seriously. "Stark's been manipulated in and out of marriages and bedrooms since the dude was fifteen. He's gonna flip if it happens again, yeah?"

Steve leans his head back to stare at the ceiling. "Yeah."

"But he wasn't mad at you. That's a good sign, man."

"You think so?" Steve doesn't even know anymore.

"Uh, yeah? The guy's trust issues have trust issues. He doesn't figure you for that kind of asshole. Good sign. Definitely."

"He's angry at Fury."

"Fury's a dick." Barton says it almost fondly. "But he can handle it. You didn't let Stark off in his suit, did you?"

Steve winces, but doesn't answer.

Barton sighs. "Yeah, great. Let's hope Stark doesn't blow up Newark. Look, man, I get that you're worried. What is it you're worried about?"

"Why did Director Fury set me up with Stark?"

"Are you sure that's the right direction?"

"What do you mean?" Steve asks, opening his eyes.

"Well, relationships, they go two directions, right? Maybe Fury's setting you up with Stark. But maybe he's setting Stark up with you. Just because you got the bedroom doesn't mean you were the point of the exercise."

"Tony thinks it's his for money. Or his, you know."

"Oh yeah," Barton hums. "And who wouldn't hit that. Guy's got a world-class ass."

"Hey!"

"I'm just saying, the man's hot. But he's also wound pretty tight. Fury's been shopping around for a husband for Stark for a while now, is all I'm saying."

"He--what? You mean Tony's right?" Steve slams his chair back down. "This is about his money."

"Tasha doesn't think so." Barton sights down an arrow, checks the fletching again, sets it aside on its own. It looks the same as the others to Steve.

"Wait--what does she know about this?"

"She wrote his file. One of her recs was to avoid setting Stark up with a partner and then using that partner to direct him in missions." Barton rolls his eyes, like that's supposed to be funny, but Steve finds it horrible. "But her other rec was that he needs a monogamous alpha partner. Help with his hormones and crazy trauma shit. She thinks he goes for alpha dudes. So, Fury always made sure there were some."

"Some alpha dudes," Steve repeats. "Where would these alpha dudes be?"

"You know, charity dos, SHIELD functions, consulting gigs, that kind of shit. Wherever Fury figured Stark would be. Not linked to SHIELD, because of what Tash said, or not always linked, but just his type and nicely background checked. Apparently, he didn't go for any of them. Well, there were a couple guys he banged in the bathroom, like Williamson and I think--"

"I don't need their names, thank you," Steve says firmly. "Are you telling me that when I woke up...."

"He figured you'd be just Stark's type, yeah." Barton moves on to another arrow. "You gotta understand, man, this is a different world. Look, if back in the day, his dad had needed a little deep dicking to keep making shit, what would you do?"

Steve narrows his eyes at Barton, but Barton, being Barton, doesn't seem to care. "Really. That's your analogy?"

"Dude's the finest scientific mind in his generation. Any asshole can put on the armor and fly around and blow shit up. Uh, don't tell Stark I said that. But practically nobody can figure out how he built it and believe me, everybody's tried."

Steve stares at the arrows, brushes his finger against a tip. "I guess, if it was Howard, I'd...find him someone."

"There you go."

Steve's trying really hard not to be offended that he wasn't the point of the exercise. He likes Tony, he does, but it's just that usually....

"Man, it's like your thoughts are a flashing neon sign on your face. You're a good guy. Captain America, right? Fury's not going to trust Stark with just anyone. Why do you think

he fought so hard to keep Stark out of other teams? You're used to being the one who gets to pick his lovers, and hey, I'm not an alpha, but I get that you guys get off on that shit."

"We do not get off on that."

"Whatever you gotta tell yourself. But look at it from his perspective a second."

That's what Steve is *trying to do*. "What's your point?"

"If someone else picked the dude who popped my cherry, I might be more or less OK with that, depending on how it ended up turning out."

"Could you not--never mind." Steve should just give up on Barton's language. "I know it didn't go well. I met him once."

"Yeah, I read that report. But look, what if you were essentially handed over to that guy, completely helpless?"

"I'd fight back," Steve says, because that's who he is. "With my fists, if I had to."

"Yeah, no, man. Life don't work that way. You're thinking like an alpha again, dude. Everyone, your whole family, says this is what you gotta do. And maybe, through biology, or through modern chemistry, or just through manipulative bullshit, you like some of it, which means the people who made you do it aren't completely full of shit."

Steve's taken the arrow that Barton set aside, is trying to figure it out. "You're saying part of him liked being with Fromm."

"You ever been tortured?"

"What?" Steve looks up. "But that was later."

"No, you gotta stop thinking just about the third marriage. I'm still talking about Fromm."

"There was no indication of violence," Steve says slowly. "I mean, I didn't like Fromm, but--
"

"But you figure if *our Tony* had been *good* for him, he'd get out of there alive?" Barton sets down his arrows. "Man. No wonder Stark bogied off in the suit during your afterparty."

"Hey!" Steve's kind of offended. "And he did get out alive."

"Oh yeah, right," Barton says, rolling his eyes. "Because you've never seen a dead man walking."

Steve shuts his teeth tight against the words that want to come out. Finally, he says, "Usually only after some fairly serious torture."

"Right." Barton grabs the arrows, stands, slaps Steve on the shoulder. "Catch you later, man."

*

When Tony finally gets home, he's not surprised that Steve is waiting up for him. He is a little surprised that Steve has made him cookies.

"Wow, snickerdoodles. Those take a lot of time. Thanks." Tony inhales two because he hasn't had anything to eat in....well, best not to even ask Jarvis. Steve gets kind of intense about missed mealtimes.

"You're welcome." Steve's watching him carefully, but he hasn't done anything yet, like tackle Tony against the wall, propose marriage, say he killed Fury (unlikely, but you never know).

"So," Tony says, because, well.

"So," Steve says. His eyes crinkle when he smiles like that. "I'm glad you're home."

"Oh. Well. You know. I do live here."

Steve nods. "You do. But I'm still glad you're home."

Tony grabs some more cookies. Steve's so sincere it's kind of painful. "You owe me a classic Metallica concert shirt."

"I'll see what I can do," Steve says, earnest. "I got a little carried away. Was that why you blacked out?"

Tony raises his eyebrows, but he shouldn't really be surprised that Steve would latch onto that. "No. It just happens."

"When you," Steve clears his throat, "have sex?"

That's pretty fucking funny, at least if you're Tony. "You fuck my mouth in a hangar bay full of soldiers, but you blush at the word sex."

Steve's cheeks turn darker pink. "I can say it!"

"Uh huh." Tony eats some more cookies. "You're cute."

"Cute," Steve mutters, still flustered. "Captain America is not cute."

"Steven Rogers is cute," Tony says.

That makes Steve look down, shy, pleased. "Yes, well. Anyway. I just wanted to make sure I hadn't done anything to you that made you, well, lose track of things."

"Not in the way you mean." They're obviously going to talk about this, so Tony makes some coffee. "It's just a side effect of my PTSD. You didn't do anything special. I told you to come to me, you did. Nothing happened that I didn't agree to in advance, and I'm not mad about the sex, OK?"

"Barton said you'd been tortured."

Fuck. Tony's hands still on the filter. "Yes. It's in my file. That's why all the bathrooms have showers, not tubs."

"Not Afghanistan," Steve says. "Fromm."

"Barton talks too much."

"Was he right?" Steve asks softly.

Tony lays his hands flat on the counter. He can feel his palms sweat. "There was no violence."

"Barton mentioned that. He seemed pretty certain it was still torture."

"Barton *really* talks too much." Tony's vision is going hyper-sharp, the coffee grounds smell fading.

"Sir," Jarvis says. "Protocol Whiskey Mike Delta has been activated."

"What does that mean, Tony?"

Tony lets Jarvis answer, concentrating on his breathing, counting pi slowly under his breath.

"Sir's vital signs indicate that he is approaching a severe dissociative state. His armor will not be available for his use until he returns to baseline."

"Is this like the memory skip?" Steve asks.

"It is similar, Captain, but more pronounced. You might be more familiar with the term shell-shock or soldier's heart. Sir is likely having a severe flashback. Please do not interrupt his mathematical recitation, as it is part of his therapy technique."

Tony's working through pi, and when that doesn't help, he switches to other calculations, numbers flowing like water in a swift moving river at the back of his mind.

After a long time, Tony hears Jarvis say, "Sir, you have returned to Foxtrot Mike Lima."

Tony smiles. "Thanks, J."

"What's that mean?" Steve asks, subdued, but still there.

"It means I'm back." Tony goes back to making coffee. His shirt is soaked in sweat, and his hair feels damp, too. "FML. Fuck my life."

Steve laughs in surprise.

Tony knows he should eat something besides cookies and coffee, but he always has trouble with his appetite when things get like this.

He knows exactly what Dr Katz would say to him. "Steve. About what Barton mentioned. I'd rather not talk about it at the moment, but, if I can, later, would you like me to?"

Tony keeps his back carefully turned so he's not looking at Steve's face, because that's easier. He knows what he *thinks* Steve will say, and he knows what Dr Katz would tell him about that, and if he's doing this to avoid therapeutic nagging, well, so what.

"I would like that," Steve says and his voice sounds odd. Warm, very soft.

Tony risks a look at him over his shoulder. Steve's wearing the oddest expression. Almost....wonder? Weird. Very weird. But maybe Tony's just misreading him.

Probably.

Definitely.

But it's Steve, so who the hell knows. "Um," Tony says. "OK. Well. You know, these are fucking good cookies."

Steve's smile goes wide and bright. "A pound of butter and what Jarvis tells me is Vietnamese cinnamon."

"Ha! I knew you used real butter." Tony's relieved that Steve is letting him get away with avoiding this, at least for now.

"I'll make you some more for poker night."

Tony steals one last cookie. "I'd like that." Who is he kidding? He's going to take the whole plate down to the workshop and eat them all.

From Steve's expression, Steve knows exactly what Tony's thinking. "It's why I made them." Then he slides the plate toward Tony.

Yeah. Steve's actually really that nice, and or maybe he really hasn't finished any briefings on modern nutrition and heart disease. Thank god.

All Tony can think is What the hell is Steve doing here with him?

But the answer is the same as it was this morning-- *Nicholas fucking Fury.*

Chapter 58

Steve's at the SHIELD headquarters near Time Square. It's not his favorite location, but there's work to do. Right now, he can do with some solid work. He's on the balcony hallway overlooking the entrance when he feels the change in the air.

SHIELD takes its security seriously. The front doors are clear heavy bulletproof glass with a view of the whole street. Just inside are guards, security checkpoints, metal detectors, more agents, more bulletproof glass.

Steve watches a phalanx of men in dark suits enter through the main doors. Steve hasn't been in this world all that long, but some things stay the same, whatever the century.

The dark suits are all impeccable, the ties subdued, but the air of violence is just as it ever was. Bully boys, a lot of them, surrounding a single figure in their center.

One deep inhale and Steve knows exactly who it is.

All around the huge marble-floored foyer agents are going on high alert. Hands hover at hips, slide into jackets, press panic buttons under desks.

Steve doesn't bother with the elevator. He takes the stairs in a few long leaps, runs forward, but he's afraid it's still going to take too long.

But SHIELD is more subtle than that. By the time Steve reaches the turnstile, there is no mass of weapons raised and ready. Just a few senior agents in suits standing around the group, watching that central figure, although a few are watching the bodyguards.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Sa Richardson says, "Is Tony in?"

Steve looks at the SHIELD agents on high alert. "He's fine." He frowns when no one moves. "Gentlemen, I said *he's fine*."

A few agents reluctantly look away. None of Sa Richardson's men have moved, which tells Steve more than he'd like to know. Not just muscle, but well trained.

Sa Richardson is still slouched elegantly against a turnstile when Tony appears from the elevator. He shoves through the SHIELD agents with vicious elbow jabs and his usual bravado. When he reaches Sa Richardson, Tony rolls his eyes. "I thought you'd come to the house."

"I was in the neighborhood," Sa Richardson drawls. He eyes the foyer, smiles a little. "Should we take this party someplace a little more comfortable?"

"Tony," Steve says quietly. The ripples among the agents signals something, but Steve isn't sure what.

"What? Oh right." Tony turns to a large man in a dark gray suit. "Val, I asked him to come. Stand down, everyone."

The air is still tense.

"I can come another time, babe," Sa Richardson says, unruffled as ever, "but you did say it was urgent."

"It is urgent." Tony glares at the man he'd called Val. "Seriously? You're going to disrespect my childhood friend?"

"Na Stark, you know I can't let all these men in," Val says, eying the bodyguards. "It's a security risk."

"No, really?" Tony's in fine sarcastic form today. "I'll vouch for them. So will the Captain. You gonna go against Captain fucking America?"

Steve's not sure what's going on, but he is certain that Alex Richardson poses no threat to Tony's safety. "Let him in. I'll clear it with the Director, if need be."

Val looks like he's glad to kick the whole mess upstairs to someone else. "It's on your head, I guess. But the enforcers stay down here. I'm not letting a lot of criminals past the gates. Fury would have my head."

Alex looks at him through his long lashes. "I don't know what you mean. These gentlemen simply work for me in an administrative capacity, but since they make you so uncomfortable, I suppose they can wait here. I'm sure Na Stark will keep me safe."

Tony rolls his eyes. "Safe enough."

Steve isn't surprised that Alex makes it through the metal detector without setting anything off. Alex's bodyguards all quietly walk over to one wall to stand in what looks an awful lot like parade rest, eyes focused in the distance, faces blank, still.

Steve gives the enforcers one last long look, then follows the omegas. Tony leads the way up the stairs two at a time. Alex runs after him, laughing softly and saying something Steve can't quite make out. They both look young as they go up the stairs, like they're just old friends racing to see who can get there first. Steve misses Bucky with a sudden punch to his gut.

He lets them get ahead a bit, watches Tony choose a room at random. It's locked, but that's never really given Tony pause. He swipes his SHIELD pass at the door and the door lock flashes green. Right.

Steve gets there just as the door is shutting, sticks his foot in it. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," Tony says, but Steve knows he doesn't really mind the intrusion.

The room is someone's office, complete with family pictures and a few potted plants. Alex hops back to sit on the desk, dis-arranging a neatly placed blotter.

Tony takes the guest chair and bows Steve towards the main desk chair.

"I'll stand, thanks," Steve says.

Tony props his feet on the desk. "Suit yourself."

Alex takes a slim cigarette case from his jacket pocket. Steve hasn't seen one of those since he woke up. It appears to be beautifully engraved gold and looks expensive. Steve isn't surprised that it didn't set off the metal detector, because sure as anything, it's Tony's work.

To Steve's surprise, when Tony sees the case, he goes still for just a hairs breadth of moment, then he's pulling out his phone. "Glad you could come down today. I've been stuck doing a lot of meaningless repairs for these yahoos."

Steve's used to watching Tony fiddle with his phone. This time Tony's fingers flash over icons, white lettering on clear, almost meaningless symbols except for one second's pause while Tony's forefinger is flat on the glass then taps twice. It's a different dance than Tony's usual bored in a meeting playtime or even mid-mission briefing research. More serious, more intent.

"I hope they're not working you too hard," Alex says. He looks like a model, posed against the desk, all long legs and serious eyes, pretty as a movie star. Only Steve's finely tuned senses can scent a hint of arousal and the deeper scent of something more powerful, something possessive, protective. Violent.

Tony raises an eyebrow, tosses his phone on the desk. "Idle hands are the devil's playground. So, want to tell me what's so important?"

To Steve's surprise, Alex doesn't answer. He takes a gold lighter out of his pocket and flicks it open. A warm honey colored flame clicks on, and he drags deep on his cigarette. The smell is rich and sweet, more than just tobacco.

"I'm pretty sure this building is non-smoking," Steve says apologetically.

"Is it?" Alex asks, and his eyes laugh just like Tony's. "How surprising." Without further ado, he pulls something else from his pocket. It's a small piece of plastic about the size of the tip of a man's thumb.

Tony takes it. "Thanks. You could have couriered that."

"No, I couldn't have." Alex drags deep on his cigarette, blows two long streams out his nose. "Tango Delta, Jarvis?"

Tony goes still.

To Steve's surprise, Jarvis says, from the phone, "As you say, Sa Richardson. We are in the clear. Do you wish the Fourth Bridge protocol?"

Steve has no idea what the hell they're talking about, but it's obviously serious. Tony's face has gone gray. "Uh, fellas, should I maybe tell you that some folks are approaching the

door?"

Tony sticks the plastic item in his pocket, and Alex tosses a second one on the desk. "Your other surmise was correct, darling," Alex says. "How much longer, Captain?"

"They're about twenty yards out, coming at a fast walk," Steve says, watching Tony and Alex closely.

"I met with the syndicates," Alex says quickly.

Tony's eyes widen. "All of them?"

Alex looks at the door. "The ones that matter, yes. I can get him under. Jarvis, London Blackout."

"Yes, Sir," Jarvis says. It's the first time Steve's ever heard Jarvis address anyone but Tony as Sir.

There's a knock at the door. Tony turns his head, frowns. His fingers flash in quick movements to Alex, who flashes his fingers in a few quick movements back. Then Alex nods.

"Let them in," Tony says. His voice sounds strange--low and husky. His eyes are full of some strong emotion that Steve can't quite read.

Steve looks between Alex and Tony again, questioning. "Let them in," Alex says. He doesn't look like a model anymore. There's a line between his eyebrows, and Steve understands that whatever else Alex might be, those men downstairs had absolutely been obeying him and not another.

When Steve cracks the door, he finds Agent Rowland standing there. He's the agent Hill sends to deal with the Avengers when Phil's out of town. "Captain," Rowland says. "May I come in, please?"

Steve steps back.

Agent Rowland comes inside and shuts the door. Alex looks at Steve, glances at the wall where the hallway entrance would be if there weren't walls in the way. Steve meets his eyes, shakes his head a tiny fraction. Alex covers his nod by taking another drag on the spicy sweet cigarette.

"I'm assuming this has to do with the Keller business?" Agent Rowland asks, looking between Steve and Tony.

"No," Alex says. He crosses his ankles, points one foot, looks up through sooty-dark lashes. "And this is a private party, I'm afraid."

"Sa Richardson--" Agent Rowland frowns over at Steve, looks at Tony. For some reason, Rowland's hand is curled on his hip. Close to his gun, Steve realizes.

"I asked him to come," Tony says. "We need to talk to Phil. No offense, Rowland. Seriously. But we need Phil for this. Fetch him."

Rowland frowns, obviously very unhappy about this. "Let me just call--"

"I'll be here," Steve says, tired of this game already. "Nothing is going to happen. Just go get Phil."

Rowland looks at each of them in turn. When he looks at Alex, Alex blows a smoke ring, as ostentatious and obnoxious as Tony in one of his moods.

"All right," Rowland says finally. "But I'm stationing agents in the hall. Call if you need anything."

Fat lot of good they'd do from yards away, but Steve just opens the door for Rowland to slip back out. When Rowland's footsteps retreat to the end of the hall, Steve nods to them.

"Your pretty boy sure is handy to have around," Alex says, eying Steve up and down. "He makes a delightful footman. Very good at opening doors."

"He comes in useful on occasion." Tony lays his thumb on the phone for a moment. "Very good at lifting the odd motorcycle, too."

"I'm sure." Alex looks at the phone, sighs. "I suppose if I must, I must."

Tony grins at him. "It was your idea."

Alex just shakes his head and begins to whistle softly. It's a lovely melody, sweet but strange. After a moment, Tony comes in, singing, "Oh let the sun beat down upon my face, stars to fill my dream..."

"Very good, Sirs," Jarvis says.

Steve jumps a little. Yes, it's a code of some kind, but he'd almost enjoyed that music.

Alex does a little drum roll on the desk, ending with a flourish. "So. As I was saying, the syndicates agreed to your proposal. We have a go as of Friday. They seemed pleased to be asked."

Tony grunts, like that's not news.

Alex is watching him closely. "Darling, do you want to tell me about the other queries?"

"No, I don't." Tony looks at Alex, and it's a hard look, firm. "Not here."

"At the house? At home?"

Tony shakes his head. "Not *anywhere*. I'm serious. Nowhere."

Alex lifts both hands palms out. "As you like. You know I don't agree with those reports on you."

Steve watches Tony shrug irritably, like he's shaking off an old argument.

"Fine." Alex crosses his arms over his chest. "Babe. Give me something here. I love you, I do, but this was a lot of asks all at once."

Tony looks almost hurt, but the expression passes so quickly Steve wonders if he imagined it. "I'm good for it."

Alex hops off his perch and kneels, so he can lean his forehead against Tony's. "Don't be an idiot. That's not it at all. I'm worried. I just want to know what's going on."

"When will you figure out that I know what I'm doing?" Tony says, trying for light.

"Probably not until it actually happens. Spill, darling." Alex is holding Tony's face in his hands. His grip slides down Tony's neck to his shoulders, smoothing the soft cotton of the tee shirt, down further to toy with the line of bite marks still shadowed on Tony's olive skin.

The bite marks Steve made.

Tony doesn't say anything, just sits there. After another long moment, Alex sighs, turns his head and meets Steve's eyes. "Your work, I assume."

"Yes," Steve says, short.

Alex's eyes are a curious mix of green and blue, striking. He's beautiful and his scent is as rich as Steve remembered, all fresh earth and growing things, as lovely as summer. Alex's gaze is bold, direct, unafraid. Steve can smell Alex's scent deepen, get even richer, full of emotion.

"You're not just the CEO of a manufacturing firm," Steve says.

"No," Alex says. Tony's eyes have fallen shut, and while he isn't relaxed exactly, he seems content to let Alex and Steve talk.

"It takes a lot to make SHIELD agents nervous," Steve points out.

"Maybe they're not as stupid as those uniforms make them look."

Some of them were more than just nervous. Some of them were afraid. Steve smelled it, sharp and bitter in that marble and glass foyer, saw it in the tense line of Rowland's hand over his gun. Maybe that thought shows on his face, because Alex smiles, just a little quirk of his mouth.

"What are you doing here, really?" Steve asks.

"I asked him to drop Banner off the grid," Tony says. He meets Steve's gaze squarely.

"You--can he really do that?" Steve asks, surprised. He knows that Dr Banner has been on the run off and on for years. The doctor is a very smart man, but SHIELD had always known his exact location. It was one of their specialties, keeping track of people.

"Oh yes," Tony says. It's his science voice, stating something factual, something certain as mathematics, clear as physics. "We won't do it unless and until we need to, and not without Bruce's go ahead, but it's important to have options. Alex is good at options."

Steve knows it can't be that simple. "If we do that, how long can he stay gone?" What he really means is 'Can Dr Banner stay gone only as long as he's not Hulked out.'

"As long as he needs," Alex says, sitting back on his heels. "As long as he wants. He doesn't have to stay human to stay off the grid."

Tony brushes the back of his knuckles against Alex's cheek. His tanned and grease-stained fingers should look out of place against Alex's porcelain skin, but they just looks right. Alex gives Tony's hand a quick affectionate kiss.

Right. Steve hopes fervently that he's not blushing, but he probably is. "Sa Richardson, on behalf of the team, I appreciate your assistance in keeping Dr Banner safe."

Alex gives him an amused look. "I didn't do it for the team. I'm sure another gray-uniformed drone will appear in a moment, so I'll just take this chance to tell you the other reason I came."

Tony sits up, but Alex lays a gentle hand on his shoulder, traces the line of Tony's collarbone. Tony looks back and forth between them, guarded, but relaxes under Alex's touch.

"As you deduced, Captain, I'm not just the CEO of a manufacturing firm." Alex's gaze is direct, calm. "I'm in charge of a large and complex organization. One of the reasons I came today was to see things for myself."

Steve nods slowly. "I see."

"I'm not sure that you do," Alex says. "The world I inhabit, it's not the same world you inhabit." He holds up one long fingered hand, twirls his wedding band. "Do you know your Archimedes?"

What? Steve stares at him. "Is that a new villain?"

Alex laughs. "No, Captain. He was a mathematician and an engineer who demonstrated the principle of leverage. Give me a place to stand and I can move the world. Tony is an engineer of weapons, of machinery, of metal and circuits and tech. I, on the other hand, am a civil engineer."

Those eyes are lovely, surprisingly sea-like in the way their color shifts with the light, from green to blue and back again. The scent coming off Alex is strong, protective, and Steve is certain that Alex knows very well just how enticing it is. Steve ignores his arousal, ignores

the lively gaze fixed on him, pays attention only to Tony, who is looking at the wall, more silent than Steve has seen him since their disastrous meeting about Tony's tendencies for bad press.

"When I was a boy, Tony introduced me to the power of the earth." Those elegant shoulders shrug. "You could say my life's work is creating a place to stand, a fulcrum, just as Tony's work is building levers."

"That's poetic, but not real informative," Steve says.

"Oh, I think you understand better than you like to let on." Alex glances at Tony, seems to come to a decision. "Darling?"

"I didn't tell him," Tony says, "but you can if you want. He's likely guessed already."

"Good." Alex meets Steve's eyes. "I've been creating places for Tony to stand for a long long time."

Oh. Steve feels a shiver of shock. "You helped him."

"Yes. I helped him." Alex looks at the door, back at Steve. They probably don't have much time until Coulson and Rowland arrive. "Tony told me about Ross's little machinations. About some other things. I wanted to see things for myself, get a taste of the air, consider the lay of the earth. I find I don't much like the landscape."

Steve knows a threat when he hears one, but he also understands the urge to protect Tony. "He asked me to come to him. I wouldn't have, unless he'd asked."

"I'm sure that's true. Tony is an excellent judge of character when it comes to that sort of thing." Alex touches one of the bite marks on Tony's arm. "But I wasn't actually talking about you having sex with my best friend, as delightful an activity as that is."

Tony snorts.

Steve crosses his arms over his chest. "Is this about the bedroom?"

"No. This is about fulcrums and levers, Captain, angles and areas." Alex hops back to his feet, sits on the desk. "If one cannot say no, can one truly say yes?"

He seems to be waiting for an answer. As much as Steve hates it, he gives the only answer possible. "No. If the only possible answer is yes, then it's not really a yes."

"Correct." Alex takes another cigarette from his case, lights it. As the sweet smoke fills the room, he says, "Creating ways to say no where none existed before is something of a specialty of mine. That's why I'm here. I have a whole pocketful of brand new nos."

Steve really has no idea what Alex is talking about. Tony is both relaxed and quiet, which is just odd, but reassuring in a way. "You brought nos. In your pocket."

Sure enough, Alex pulls something from his pocket and tosses it at Steve. On automatic, Steve catches it. It's a small cylinder, much like a lipstick. "What is this?"

"Three doses of ethically sourced Kashmir," Alex says.

Tony shuts his eyes tight, but he doesn't say a word.

Steve turns the thing back and forth in his hands. He can't even see a seam on it, it looks as smooth as a polished bullet. "I don't know what that means."

Alex stands, long fingers giving Tony's shoulder a last lingering caress. He paces over to Steve, takes the cylinder, puts his thumb on the bottom. A line appears on the bullet shape, just like the seam in a tube of lipstick. In fact, when Alex removes the cap, Steve expects to see a glossy lipstick inside. Instead, it appears to be a small stamp, wet with something that is most certainly not ink.

Steve jerks back, gives his head a hard shake. "What is that?" It's like the whole world has suddenly gone slightly gray. Tony's scent is sweeping away in a tide of greasy swamp water, and Steve's stomach feels like it's about to revolt all over the gorgeous man in front of him.

"I like to think of it as civilization in a can, but our focus groups found that phrase prejudicial against potential alpha customers." Alex puts the cap back on.

Steve swallows hard and tries not to hurl all over the carpet. God, it's like Tony's scent is fading down to nothing. Alex's own scent is awash with some kind of gray headachy bitterness. "This is not civilization," he manages. "This is hell."

"No," Alex says sharply. "This is *control*. I've calibrated this dose of Kashmir to match your personal chemistry. If you experience any stressful events whatsoever, you can get your brain back. Place your thumb on the bottom, open it, swipe it directly over your bonding glands. It will stain a mild brown and the smell may disturb others. If you need to be discrete, you can swipe it over your genitals instead, but be aware that can cause a burning sensation."

"I think I'd really rather live with the extra emotions," Steve says, because wow, he feels horrible right now.

"It's not your emotions I'm worried about." Alex takes Steve's fist, uncurls his fingers, forces the cylinder into it. "I know Tony's given you the go ahead to fuck him into next week if you're on the edge of losing control, and that is absolutely his choice. If it meant keeping you safe, I'd fuck you myself. But this organization is full of sharks who are capable of manufacturing your loss of control, and I will not allow Tony to be bullied into bed. Not this time."

Steve thinks of the double bed, curls his fist tighter around the cylinder. He can't meet Alex's eyes anymore. "All right."

"This way, if you get Tony into bed it's because he wants to make love to you and you to him." Alex looks over his shoulder at Tony, back at Steve. "He asked for my help. Here it

is. If you're an honorable man, you'll let him make a real choice. You won't let someone else rig the game."

"How long does each dose last?" Steve asks quietly.

"It'll knock you back to baseline for at least two hours. With a normal alpha, or even a regular extreme alpha, a single dose will damp all surges for forty eight hours. For you, it's shorter."

Steve turns the cylinder over in his hand. It appears sturdy, and it will fit on his utility belt. He can wear this in combat.

"Steven," Tony says quietly. "I'm glad you came to me. I don't mind handling you when you're close to the loss of control. I didn't ask him to bring this."

"I think your friend has a point," Steve says. "It's good tactics to have a backup plan."

"So long as it's not a plan to retreat," Tony says sharply.

"No. I won't use it to retreat, and if you want, I'll give it you. Then you can decide how you'd like me." Steve tosses the little cylinder in the air, catches it again, offers it on his palm to Tony.

Tony picks it up, turns it over and over. His eyes are unguarded, contemplative, a little wondering, as he looks between his hand and Steve.

Alex heaves a world-weary sigh. "Such romance warms the cockles of my bitter shrivelled heart. I'm tempted to keep mum just to bask in all this delicious trust, but I'm afraid the cost of the present was too dear." He pulls out a second cylinder and tosses it to Steve. "Three more doses. Now you each have one."

Tony looks up, frowns. "Three, I can accept, but six is too many."

Alex drags on his cigarette, looking remarkably like Tony when he's being his most bullheaded. "Six is just right."

Steve looks back and forth between them. He's never heard Tony complain about the lavishness of, well, anything. "Is this expensive?"

Alex blows smoke at the ceiling vent, right where the sprinkler system is supposed to be. "In a manner of speaking. Consider it a gift. Like Tony, I'm a very wealthy man."

"No one's that wealthy," Tony says sharply. "Where did you get this?"

"Ethically sourced, babe. You have my word."

Tony clearly does not like that answer whatsoever. Steve expects to see Tony bluster or yell, but instead he looks away. "Well."

Steve opens his mouth to ask what counts for 'too expensive' in Tony Stark's world when he hears the soft tread of good dress shoes on industrial carpet. "They're coming."

Quick as a wink, Alex stubs out his cigarette. Tony makes his cylinder of Kashmir vanish. Steve decides he'd better put his own away. Alex has Tony's phone and is tapping at it vaguely by the time Agent Rowland knocks at the door.

Alex and Tony have the same boyish air of getting away with something that the Commandos had when HQ brass was coming around. Quick, get rid of those dirty socks, quick, shove that girly mag under the mattress, quick, straighten the sagging tents.

Steve's smiling when he opens the door to Rowland's frown.

"Captain," Rowland says, entering. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with us."

The smile slides off Steve's face. It's a subtle insult that Steve's beginning to notice more often. The way some agents will address Steve as if he's the only person in the room, as if Tony isn't even there. Or is just an extension. Ignoring Sa Richardson makes it worse.

Alex's bitter social smile is all teeth. "Good afternoon, Agent Rowland."

Tony ignores Rowland completely. "Thanks for coming, Phil."

"It's not a problem, Stark." Phil enters, nods to everyone in turn.

Stark. That's another way to play the same game. When Phil wants to make people pay attention to Tony, he uses the flat plain Stark. The way everyone in SHIELD says 'Barton' when they mean Hawkeye off the comms.

Steve shuts the door and leans against it. He's not surprised when Rowland takes the desk chair while Phil appears to be perfectly content to stand exactly equidistant between Alex and Tony. Really, you could make a tactical map of the stupid mind games going on in this room.

Is Alex as good at these games as Tony? They must have learned under the same teachers. Does it vary like a fighting style? Would Alex send in his cavalry at the same time Tony?

Rowland clasps his hands together. "So, what's this all about?"

Tony props his feet back up on the desk, crosses his ankles. "Phil darling, Christmas has come early. I asked my personal Santa Claus to deliver you some presents." He waves a languorous hand at Alex. "Sadly, he refused to wear the Santy hat."

"Red clashes terribly with my skin tone," Alex says in the sort of husky bedroom drawl omega beauties used to use in the pictures. Maybe they still do. It's so different from the everyday speaking voice he'd been using that Steve is sucked in for a moment. Honestly, Steve should be used to this sort of thing after living with Tony for months, but good grief.

Rowland looks a little swept away.

Steve watches and yes, right on cue, Alex strokes a hand down Tony's leg, draws a little pattern on the inside of his ankle, then trails back up and up and up. "Is it better to give or receive?"

"Is it too much to ask for both?" Tony lets his legs fall apart. "Giving presents. Getting them."

"Unwrapping them," Alex says in that boudoir voice, toying with the seam of Tony's jeans. His eyes are laughing every bit as much as Tony's.

Rowland's mouth is a little open. At this rate, the idiot is going to make a pass at a taken Avenger or a married man. Or both. And in front of his boss.

Steve clears his throat a little. "I could watch you two play all day. You'd sure have been a lot more popular than me on the USO tour. But maybe we should get to the actual intel, fellas?"

He's met with two identical outraged pouts.

Steve kind of wants to laugh, but that wouldn't be very nice to Rowland, who still looks dazed. "Intel? Please?"

"Oh fine," Alex says. "But I get to watch Phil unwrap the presents."

"And it's not intel," Tony says. "As if I'd drag Alex all the way over here just to courier a measly bit of *intel*."

"I've always thought good intel makes the loveliest Christmas presents," Phil says mildly.

"This isn't pretty." Alex takes something from his pocket, rolls it over his knuckles like a conjurer with a coin, then tosses it to him. "So, if you'd like to return it, no hard feelings."

Phil catches it out of the air. It's a flat round pill box, very plain, the kind Steve used to see back in his world. He just holds it for a moment. When he opens it, he says nothing at all.

Rowland gets up and leans forward. "What is it? Let me see, Agent."

Phil just holds the case, looking at the contents. His expression doesn't change, but he blinks twice, then flips it closed. "I assume this is genuine."

"You assume correctly," Alex says, back to the coy minx.

Batting his eyelashes, Tony drawls, "Is that lovely enough for you, Phil darling?"

"Yes." Phil looks at the closed pill case for another long moment. "Agent Rowland, please take this to the Director. He's in a meeting in 342B."

"But what is it?" Rowland says impatiently.

"It's a shipment of Wrath," Phil says.

Rowland's eyes go wide and dark. "Sir, we need to determine the provenance of--"

Alex, still sitting on the desk nearly Rowland, puts a playful finger to his lips. "It's terribly bad manners to ask where a present was acquired."

"Take it to Fury," Phil says.

"But he's a drug dealer! We need to know--"

"Agent Rowland." Phil's voice is calm as ever. "Take this to Director Fury in 342B. Let him know that I am meeting with Stark and Richardson in Tanya Bedemeyer's office."

Rowland looks furious, but he takes the small box in careful hands. "Sir."

Steve steps away from the door to let him out. "Thank you, Agent Rowland."

There are eight presents in total. When they're all laid out on Tanya Bedemeyer's desk, they look inconsequential. The detritus of a man's pockets. There's a plastic device like Alex had given Tony earlier--a flash drive. There's a vial as small as Tony's pinky, full of a honey gold liquid. There's a small blister pack of brightly colored capsules, just six of them. There's a tiny envelope with nothing but a few strands of hair.

The last three presents are paper.

A chemical formula, written on torn corner of graph paper. A short phrase and a series of numbers, written on the back of a business card.

The last present is a sheet of steno paper, crumpled and dirty. An address, a car description, a date and time--the day after tomorrow.

Phil looks at it, looks at Alex. "What do I do with this?"

Alex takes out a cigarette. Tony leans forward and flicks a lighter for him. Alex takes a long drag, blows smoke at the ceiling.

Phil watches the smoke swirl around the ceiling tiles, then he asks, "What is this?"

"It's a delivery date," Alex says. His voice is back to normal, all business. "Kline and Dotson are moving east. Nobody wants that."

"Including you." Phil's voice is almost a sneer. "Bad for business."

"Money isn't everything. Nobody likes those boys. They offered plenty of us cheap prices on wholesale goods. Easy profit. None of us said yes."

"SHIELD isn't really in this line," Phil says. "Maybe you should get someone else to take out your business rivals."

"Don't be an idiot." Alex taps the paper. "This isn't about business rivalries. I don't run that kind of product and you know it. This also isn't about taking out a couple of punk alpha

assholes who like to traffic in pretties on the side. This is trading in favors, just like the rest. SHIELD cred with the other bureaus is at an all time low. Fucking call up some Fed you want a marker with, give them this intel, and tell them they'll owe you one. A big fat favor."

"How big a favor?" Phil asks.

Alex tucks the cigarette in his mouth and flashes both hands, slowly, twice. Then he flashes his right hand and two fingers on his left. "Capice?"

Phil carefully folds the paper. "Meth?"

But it's Tony who answers, and his smile is a fierce baring of teeth. "China white."

"Derivative, I assume," Phil says.

"You know what they say about assumptions," Alex says.

"I have one question, if I may." Phil's stance is deferential, respectful. Not soft, not afraid like the other agents had been, but as if Alex is worth talking to.

"Knock yourself out," Alex says, hopping off the desk. His hand is still on Tony's calf.

"What's in this for you, Richardson?"

"For me? Not a thing." Alex draws another lazy pattern on Tony's leg. Steve follows the shape, but he can't make out whether it's letters or shapes. "Do we have a deal, Agent?"

Phil looks at the presents on the desk. The scraps of paper, the vial, the pills. "Seven favors, and one favor via the FBI or DEA, your choice."

"Tony's choice," Alex corrects.

"Of course. My apologies." Phil looks at Alex for a moment, then he spits in his hand and holds it out. "We have a deal."

Alex spits in his own hand, shakes Phil's hand. "Pleasure doing business with you, Agent."

Steve watches the exchange, counts the markers laid on that desk. Seven favors, and one in the bank. Yes, you could write a tactical map of the etiquette in this room.

"I think," Steve says into the quiet, "that the pleasure was all ours, Sa Richardson."

Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay in getting up this chapter. I had planned to post this scene all in one chapter, but it got a little out of hand (OK, it's over 24K), so it's going to be posted every other day in sections.

I believe in showing, not telling, but in this instance, I'm just going to say it. This chapter (and the next few chapters) is about Tony having sex that he actually enjoys. It's about Tony's personal sexual and romantic preferences. Fair warning: it's kinky, it's not with Steve (though it's definitely not cheating), it's got some worldbuilding thrown in. I'm not sure it's going make people happy, but, it makes Tony happy and frankly, I really wanted to just wallow in making Tony happy for a little while.

If you want to avoid any non-Steve sex but still want the plot, just read to the first *.

For visual reference, here are some examples of omega wedding jewelry:
This is the overall look and style Alex chose. Simple anklet example one and two. A braided version. The sort of thing Alex would buy (Chanel according to the image source), although Tony's has a lot more rubies and has more charms hanging from it, so the pieces move and sway. Lastly, here is a metal-based collar, not leather, but it's the right sort of feel and stone size.

This week has truly sucked.

Tony's still not sure what to think about Fury's damn machinations. So many options, each one more horrifying.

Tony's put a moratorium of thinking up new reasons for Fury to set him up with Steve after Jarvis suggested the appalling possibility that Fury wanted a Roanoke in the hopes of breeding new super soldiers. Tony'll probably never know for sure why Fury did what he did, and right now, it doesn't matter.

What *does* matter is that stupid fucking double-whammy on the Helicarrier.

Ross wanting to arrest Dr Banner makes sense, so far as it goes. Ross wanting to have Tony assigned to him? Also sensible, so far as it goes. Having both those ideas at the same time? On the same day? Proposed to Steve? In a single meeting?

No fucking chance Ross made all that up on his own.

There's just too many ways it doesn't work. Tony hasn't figured out why it happened, but he's pretty sure that part isn't Fury. It's just not.

Whatever else Fury does, he still likes Captain America and considers him a hero. Steve's number one trigger is losing his team. Fuck with his people, fuck with taking away any of them, and Steve completely loses his shit.

That's not an outcome Fury would want, especially in an uncontrolled environment.

So instead of spending the week remembering the delicious taste of Steve's cock in his throat, instead of trying to convince him to allow Tony a repeat performance, Tony's stuck working on life-critical spy business.

It's not enough to find a way to drop Banner off the radar. Whoever is fucking the Avengers around is too powerful already. They need multiple plans, multiple points of escape, multiple points of control, and as Alex said, multiple fulcrums for their levers. It's god damn hard work and it's exhausting.

Tony's supposed to attend a dinner party with Greg Espinoza and Claudia Stewart tonight. He's just finished drinks with Amy Cox and Pauline Moore at some chichi private club his mother would have liked; the possible lead he'd had with Amy didn't pan out, and Pauline kept feeling him up under the table.

Happy's waiting for him by the Bentley. He opens the door and asks, "Where to, boss?" even though Happy knows his schedule better than anyone.

Tony should give him the dinner party address. He should. But he doesn't.

Happy nods at the new orders. "Yes, boss."

*

Tony leans his forearm against the doorframe, braces himself He shouldn't do this. There is so much to do, and there isn't time to do all of it. Hell, there's barely time to do any of it. Tony should go to the dinner party, then he should go home to find out more contacts and get more work done.

Before Tony can force himself to get a grip, the door opens.

Terrence looks him up and down, shakes his head. "I know I asked for a visit for my birthday, but somehow I don't think that's why you're here."

Tony drags a sexy smile out from somewhere, gives Terrence his best sultry look. That gets him a soft laugh.

"Come on in," Terrence says. "I'll get the mister."

Terrence looks good, but he always does. His honey-blond hair is in artful little spikes, his cheekbones as flawless as always, his pajamas sliding down low on perfect narrow hips. There's no guile in those hazel eyes, just warmth. All that lovely innocence and wonder makes Tony's heart ache more than he knew it could.

Tony steps inside, hears the door click shut behind him, listens to all the bolts shoot home like a familiar old friend whispering his name. Alex's Central Park West condo is almost as safe as Stark House. Tony built its security systems himself, upgrades them regularly. Alex doesn't spend much time here, but when he does, it's for business.

This week, that business is all Tony's.

"Alex," Terrence calls. "Tony's here."

Tony can hear the TV, so he wanders to the living room. Sure enough, Alex is standing there, watching something on TV, remote in one hand, glass of brandy in the other.

"Darling, I'm so glad you came. We're celebrating." Alex's smile is wide, his eyes lively and kind.

Tony's glad for the gambit, eager for the polite chitchat. "I love celebrations. Is this is specific happy news or just a joyful party for a day ending in y?"

Alex slides his arm around Terrence's waist, gives him a kiss on the cheek, murmurs something in his ear. Terrence shoots Tony a quick flirty smile then heads into the back.

"We're celebrating the hard work and dedication of our country's finest government agents, of course." Alex points the remote and the sound comes back on.

"--in Colby, Kansas," says the news anchor. "Federal officials estimate that the captured narcotics are worth upwards of eleven million dollars due to the purity of the heroin. On the black market, heroin is traded in the metric kilo, and twenty three kilos translates to fifty pounds." The news anchor burbles on, expounding on the bravery of the FBI and breathlessly regaling the amazing drug sniffing dog who just happened to indicate a problem with a beige Camry in a truck stop parking lot.

"Somebody skimmed a nice fiver," Tony says.

"Naturally." Alex slides a hand around Tony's waist and draws him in close. "How was your day, darling?"

"Lousy." The TV is now showing a photo of a smiling federal agent and his drug dog. The dog is kind of cute, all long nose and huge ears and sharp pointy teeth.

Tony moves to take a sip from Alex's glass of brandy, but Alex sets the glass away.

"You finally read the whole file." Alex flicks the TV off and turns. He puts his hands on Tony's waist, skims them up his suit, tugs on Tony's too-tight tie.

"Yeah, I did." And this is why he's here. That fucking file. He's been doing nothing but verifying the contents and following up on leads since he got back home with it. No wonder Alex didn't want to discuss the contents. Nowhere is safe enough. Tony's only read it on an un-linked laptop, and he's already melted the hard drive down in the forge.

There's just too much to think about, too much that's scary, like he's a child again, afraid of the dark.

Terrence comes into the room. He's got a little tray of drinks, snacks, and a set of leather restraints.

Tony can't help it. He laughs. "Only you would serve the handcuffs on the Spode."

"I couldn't very well serve it on the crystal. Then how would I serve the petite fours?"

"Silly of me to miss that delicate point of etiquette." Tony feels Alex's hands on his shoulders, massaging at the tension. Tony should say something, continue the conversation, but he can't take his eyes off the restraints. They're chocolate brown leather, wide bands meant for wrists, with brass buckles and clips and braided leather straps.

Alex steps in close against Tony's back, lets his hands slide around Tony's chest, fools with his tie. Tony tips his head back against Alex's shoulder, bares his neck. It's still covered in Steve's marks. God, he should feel so fucking guilty about this, but he doesn't.

Terrence's fingers ghost over the dark red bruises Steve sucked into his skin. "Alex said he's beautiful."

"He is," Tony says, and yes, there it is, the rush of hurt. It doesn't last, though, not the way it should. Fuck. He's never promised Steve anything, and god damn, he needs this. Needs this like a sharp ache.

Terrence's kiss catches him off guard, but it's easy to give in. Tony doesn't have to do anything, just let it happen. Terrence is sweet, but eager, and all Tony has to do is let himself respond. God, it's good. Tony opens his mouth, sucks on Terrence's tongue, makes needy little noises whenever Terrence comes up for air.

Behind him, Alex is sliding Tony suit coat off and down, using it to trap his hands. "How hard do you want it, darling?"

God, Tony doesn't even want to answer the question. He shuts his eyes. "How hard do you think?"

"What's your word?"

"Karma," Tony says. "But I don't want to talk tonight."

"I think we can find a way to occupy that mouth," Terrence says, and that's all the talking that happens for a while.

Tony falls into the kiss, lets himself think of nothing but the taste of them, the feel of Alex's strong hands bruising him through layers of silk and cotton, the sharp bite of Terrence's teeth against his collarbone, the heady hard tug of a hand in his hair, and then at last, at last, Alex's mouth is against his neck. His bites are familiar but they're overlaying the marks Steve made, and the rush of pleasure-pain is so overwhelming his knees go weak.

Hands catch him, though, lower him to the carpet.

Alex draws the suit jacket off. Terrence drags off his tie, undoes his shirt button by button, caressing the scars around the arc reactor as soon as it's revealed. Tony isn't allowed to do a thing, he's only allowed to take. His belt is next, slithered out by practiced hands and set aside. God yes, is all he can think, god yes.

"That's right," Alex says into his ear. "We're going to take you all the way down. Keep you under."

Tony's making little noises because Terrence is sucking on that spot right under his jaw, probably leaving new marks that Steve will see.

His pants are dragged off, his underwear, his socks, and he's naked at last. Alex has both his wrists pinned behind his back, and Terrence is making love to his throat. Tony's shivering all over, aroused and ready, wet and hard.

"Go ahead," Alex says, and Tony knows the words aren't addressed to him.

Terrence gets something from the tray. He puts something at Tony's mouth and Tony opens automatically. Two pills. Then Terrence holds up a glass, and Tony swallows. Alex strokes his thumb over Tony's wrist, affectionate and gentle, then he squeezes hard enough to bruise.

The pain is exquisite.

"Good boy," Alex whispers. Tony turns his head, shy all over again, with the first lover he ever had.

Tony can feel it when the leather touches his wrists, can feel the confusion of fingers that move his hands to position them properly so he can be tied, caught. The soft sound of the leather hissing against itself as the ties are buckled closed make his cock jump. Once the wide bands are buckled on each wrist, they're clipped together in a long line. The fingers test for give, for circulation, for fit, and then suddenly all the hands withdraw.

Tony's left kneeling, naked, bound, exposed.

His head drops forward, bangs in his eyes. The restraints pull his shoulders back, and he knows that the warm brown leather was chosen to match his skin. Alex doesn't like him in black. Black's too harsh for such a sweet thing, Alex always says, and the remembered words make Tony's cock ache and he spreads his legs a little, shifts his arms to test the pull of the leather, but it holds fast. Even if he really struggled, it wouldn't matter. He's bound tight.

"You bring me the best presents," Terrence says. He sounds young, god so young. Inexperienced at the world, but very assured about what he wants in bed, as Tony knows well. "I think I know just what we should do."

And that's the other beautiful part of going under. Tony doesn't have to decide a single thing. Not for them. They'll use him however they want, and he'll just do it, and enjoy every single second.

"And what's that, Terr?" Alex trails a hand down the line of bite marks that start on Tony's shoulder, caresses all the way down to where they vanish under the restraints.

"Let's just keep him here like this for a couple days." Terrence sounds almost giddy at the idea. "He'd like it, you know he would. We'll play with him tonight, take him down nice and hard, and then just--keep him here."

They both must be able to see what the idea is doing to him. His cock is fully hard, and god knows he's soaking wet. Fucking hell, he may actually do this.

"And that's what you want, Terr? To keep him like this?"

"We'll have to take off the cuffs sometimes, but yeah. Wouldn't it be nice to have him for a couple days? I'll be really good with him." Terrence sounds so eager, like Tony's a long wished for present. Maybe he is.

Alex traces around each of the bites on the cap of his shoulder. Tony's shivering, and he wants to ask what exactly Terrence has in mind for him, but that would not be playing the game. Not knowing is part of the fun.

"I won't hurt him," Terrence says. Tony believes that, which is almost a shame, really. "I just want to keep him like this. He'd love using his mouth on us, and wouldn't it be easier to do your work if you had him curled on your feet?"

Oh god. Tony can almost feel the blush, can definitely feel the shiver all over his skin.

"He can sleep between us, all warm and safe, and in the morning, we can fuck him awake. He loves that. We'll get him all nice and marked, give him enough to really wear him out. I mean, come on, he's obviously exhausted. Can't we just have him for a couple days? Please?"

Alex sighs behind him, like he's considering the best way of saying no. God, Tony cannot say yes to this, but he desperately wants to.

"Look at him," Terrence says, and god, that is a terrible idea. Tony doesn't need Alex to pay any more attention to him than he already is. This is fucking embarrassing enough already. Why did he come here, anyway?

Alex does look, though, and he makes a 'hm' noise.

"He came to us," Terrence says, and oh fuck no, it's his 'I'm so disappointed in you, Alex' voice. "I like him, and I'm not turning him away."

Tony needs to clear this up, needs to explain that he sure as hell did not show up at his best friend's house to beg for kinky sex, but--had he? God, maybe he had. How mortifying.

Alex traces the line of his spine, over every ridge and circling the small scars that are scattered like stars on his skin. "Darling, how much trouble will you be in if we keep you?"

Oh thank god. Oh thank god. Tony doesn't even stop to think, he just leans forward until he's resting his cheek against Terr's chest.

Alex's hand strokes his back, slow and careful, soothing him, and Tony's too grateful to be embarrassed. "How much trouble?"

Fuck, how much trouble will he be in? "All Avengers meeting tomorrow. Helicarrier, 10 to 2. Day after, supposed to meet with Dan in R&D and Shelly from marketing and Flint from DRX International. God, um, I think Dan's meeting is at 8:30. Too fucking early."

"What about your Captain?" Alex doesn't sound judgmental, just considering. His palm is flat against Tony's shoulder, a warm weight.

"He won't care." Tony rubs his face against Terr's chest. "I haven't promised that anyway. God, just do it."

"Should I tell him?" Alex asks.

"That's up to you," Tony says, surprising himself. "He'll know as soon as I get home anyway. He'll smell you all over me."

Alex's hand stays where it is, but Tony hears a faint shift, the sound of a phone being dialed. A brief pause. "This is Sa Richardson, Captain. May I have a moment of your time?"

Tony shuts his eyes tight and he can't help the soft noise he makes. Not embarrassment, not even shame, just desperate eagerness and helpless arousal. Alex is going to talk to Steve about him, and it's just--god. It's good, somehow. So good. Alex's hand strokes down his spine again, soothing.

"Thank you. No, I'm calling about Tony. He's fine, but I wondered--"

There's a little pause.

"No, he's here. I wondered if you might--yes, in fact I am. Yes, I was hoping for the next two or three days. But I understand there are some meetings which--Oh? Why yes, thank you. That's very considerate. Certainly. I will."

Tony's resting his face against Terr's chest. God only knows what Steve's saying on his end. Tony's grateful, again, that he doesn't have to talk to him.

Which is when Alex presses the phone against his ear.

Tony tries to glare at him, because holy shit unfair, but with his face pressed against Terrence's shirt, his glare is useless. "Hello?" God, he probably sounds stoned out of his mind. He always does when he goes under for Alex. Always has, probably always will. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

"Tony," Steve's voice sounds oddly happy. Weird. Very weird. "I'm so glad you're getting a chance to spend some time with your friends."

"You are?" Because wait, what.

"Yes, of course I am." Steve's voice is warm, and he still sounds cheerful. "Tony, you sound so much more relaxed. Are you enjoying yourself?"

Tony shuts his eyes, because it is one thing for Steve to mention this sort of thing in the abstract when they're still just getting to know each other, when Tony's drunk in a limo, when it's just flirting. It is a completely different thing to hear Steve say it when Tony's naked and kneeling, wrists bound so he can't even hold the phone himself. His voice comes out rough, ragged, when he finally manages to speak. "Yeah. I am."

"Good." Steve's voice sounds a little husky. "I'm glad to hear that. I want you to take this time to just enjoy yourself. Don't worry about anything else."

"Steven--you do know--" God, why is he even saying this? How fucking stupid can he be? "You know what they're doing, right?"

"I have a general idea," Steve says. He clears his throat, says in a gentle coaxing voice, "But I'd like to know more. Maybe you can tell me all about it later, when you get home."

Tony buries his face against Terrence's chest and feels Terr's hands stroke through his hair, affectionate, petting him, calming him like he's a dog. Tony's shivering, and even Alex's steady hand against his shoulder isn't enough to stop his voice from cracking a little. "Is this--" He can't finish the sentence, because he doesn't even know the right question to ask.

"Shh, it's all right," Steve says. "You're good. I want you to enjoy this. When you come home, you're going to be so relaxed. I love how easy you move when you're relaxed, how the tension just slides away and you move like a dancer."

Tony knows his face is red but he still can barely string words together. But this is important. Stupidly important. "They're going to fuck me. You get that, right?"

"Tony," Steve's voice is fond and exasperated. "The new millennium did not invent sex. I wish everyone would quit expecting me to be innocent. I'm from Brooklyn. I grew up in tenements. I was stationed overseas with a commando group, not to mention the time in Hollywood. I know they're going to fuck you. I want them to."

"Holy shit," Tony says, because what the hell else can he say? At least he's not moaning.

Alex had been holding the phone to Tony's ear, but now he puts a firm hand on Tony's back, an order to stay still. He takes the phone back for a moment. "Captain?"

Tony shivers and just waits. Alex's side of the conversation doesn't tell him much. It's all 'hmm' and 'yes' and 'I see' and 'certainly', with a few 'no's thrown in for spice. Then Alex says, "I think you should. Then ask him."

Christ. Whatever Alex is suggesting, it can't possibly end well. Tony's mind is moving slower but it's fast enough to come up with a thousand terrifying possibilities. Then the

phone is put against his ear again, and Alex's grip shifts on his back, pressing him forward into Terrence's warmth.

"Tony," Steve voice is affectionate, gentle, but serious. "I'd like you to listen to me for a minute. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes." Tony's back brain is already confused, but when he's under, he's under, and it's easy to obey.

"Good. You're very good." Steve pauses a little, and Tony can feel his own tension ratcheting up. "I want you to spend the next three days with your friend Alex and his husband. I want you to enjoy yourself, I want you to relax, I want you to let go. They want to make love to you, and if you want that too, I want you to let them. If it feels good for them to touch you, then I want you to. OK?"

Tony's breathing is going harsh and uneven. He turns his head to the side, trying to escape, but Alex just moves the phone.

"I love the way you lose that tension when Alex touches you. I love seeing the way your eyes soften. I love that you can relax. I think, I hope, that spending a couple of days in his bed will give you something you need."

"You won't be there." Tony blurts it out. "You're not--mad?"

"I won't be there, and no, Tony, I won't be mad. When you come home, you're going to smell like fresh earth and summer and sex. You'll move easier and you'll be more rested and I can't wait to see how you are after. I bet you'll be able to come sit by me on the couch, tell me about what you've been working on in the shop, without having all those thoughts about the last few days at SHIELD intrude. Do you think so?"

"I don't know." God, he doesn't, and if Steve expects--

"Shh. It's all right. It's just a hypothesis, right? It's not a test, it's just an experiment. Maybe three days in Alex's bed is enough to relax you, maybe it isn't. Maybe you'll need four days or five or a week. When was your last vacation?"

"Monaco." The words are out before he can stop himself.

Steve snorts, which is pretty funny, because he sounds just like Clint. "If I'd known that, I'd have suggested this earlier. And just so you're fully aware of how I feel about this, if you enjoy this, if it relaxes you, if it makes you happy? Then I'm regularly going to suggest you spend a few nights in Alex's bed, being fucked and kissed and petted until you're all loose and soft and warm."

Tony makes a helpless noise.

"Yes, just like that. We're not there yet, so I know I can't ask for it, not yet, but someday, I want you to come home from a vacation like this, and I want to lay you on my bed, in the

sun, and touch you everywhere and kiss the marks they've left and taste them on your skin and between your thighs. Because that's who I am."

Tony shifts restlessly, shivering. His cock is achingly hard and his thighs are wet with slick, and it should be embarrassing, but it isn't. It just feels good. Right. There isn't even the greasy slide of shame, because there is just no way to doubt Steve when he uses that extra earnest voice. He really does want this.

"You're not monogamous the way a beta is. That isn't going to bother me. Not today, not tomorrow. Do you understand?"

Oh god. "Yes." His voice is a wreck. "Just you."

That makes no sense, Tony knows it, but Steve seems to understand. "That's right. You can be with Alex and you'd still be mine. Now, can you hear how much I want you to enjoy yourself? Are you going to let yourself have this?"

"Yes," Tony manages the word with effort.

"That's it. Shh. You're being very very good. If you want, I'll do something for you in exchange. Think about what you'd like. In the meantime, I'm going to take care of all of your meetings and I'll make sure that everyone's fed on Sunday and that someone attends all of the parties and benefits for the A.I. charities. I'll let Jarvis know where you'll be, and I'll handle any world colliding crises or old Stark weapons trouble, even if they're overseas. What else?"

God, it's so hard to think when he's like this. But there is one thing left. "Steven. That job in Bogota. Tell them no."

"Tony--"

"I said *no*," Tony says, voice hard and tight.

"Of course," Steve says quickly. "I wasn't arguing. I just wanted to know whether I should try to get the whole job cancelled or just pull our people off of it."

Tony shuts his eyes tight, feels the sick roll in his gut. "There's a book in my study. Ask Jarvis to help you find my copy of Just So Stories."

"Rudyard Kipling," Steve says.

"Yes." There is a copy of Just So Stories in his house, but there's no study, and Jarvis sure as hell won't show Steve where to find a book about how the leopard got his spots. Jarvis will tell Steve about the real mongoose and the realer snake, and Steve will decide. Tony trusts him to make the hard call. Steve did it for him. "Good bedtime reading."

"All right." Steve waits a beat, then says, "Speaking of bedtime reading..."

Tony can't help it, he laughs. "You want a little real bedtime reading?"

"I do." God, Steve's voice when he's sexed up, it's all earnest goodness mixed with deliciously dark overtones. Tony could listen to him all night long.

"They say a picture's worth a thousand words," Tony says, teasing because somehow he's shot right past nerves into flirting territory.

"I am a visual artist," Steve says, voice even huskier. "Would you?"

"Oh yeah."

"I'll look forward to it. Enjoy your vacation, Tony."

Tony shivers. "Alex. You can take the phone back now. Um. Ask him if he has any requests."

The phone is pulled away from his ear, and Tony can hear Alex's easy laugh. Not the one he usually laughs now, cynical and hard, but the one from when they were two dumb kids building their first ant farm and their crane suddenly lifted their baby earthworks ten feet up an oak tree, sprinkling mud and leaves on everyone's heads.

Alex's hand on his shoulder feels like it did back then, when they were stupid and horny and fifteen, tumbling around. Tony'd gotten grass stains on his ass.

Tony doesn't pay any attention to the words being said, because they don't matter, not now. Terrence is stroking his hair, guiding him forward into a long kiss, and Alex is tracing the line of his back muscles.

He's missed this, missed the kind of touch that's not fraught with outside scents, just the green smells of home and earth and being taken on the grass under the bright wide sky. It's been too long.

Terrence's kisses deepen, and Tony angles his head, lets him fuck his mouth with his tongue. The sharp little bites feel good, too, feel like affection. It's easy, so easy, to draw back only enough so he can pant against Terrence's mouth, asking without words.

He gets the answer he expects. Terrence starts pulling his pajamas off. They're thick silk and when he's got them off, he rubs the fabric against Tony's cheek so his stubble rasps and catches. It's not the silk that matters, but the scent, both Alex and Terrence, clinging to the weave. The smell of sleep and safety.

It drives Tony just a little bit further under. He nuzzles against Terr's hand, rubs his chin against the smooth fine skin.

Before he can dip his head down and try to taste more of him, Alex wraps his fingers in Tony's hair and tips his head all the way back. Tony obeys, arches his spine until he's arched like a bow, head resting on Alex's shoulder.

"This is new," Terrence says, trailing his hand down Tony's chest, past the arc reactor, down his abs, all the way down, circling his groin but not touching his cock. "I like it. Very pretty."

Tony pants wordlessly for a moment, says, "Went dancing. Low cut pants."

"Has Steve seen this?" Terrence asks, coy.

Tony shakes his head. "But he saw the pants."

"What there was of them," Alex says, nibbling his ear. "If they're the pants I'm thinking of, darling, Steve's a better man than me if he didn't fuck you as soon as he saw them."

"I've heard of these pants." Terrence says, trailing his hand around and around the light hair that's grown back. "We'll have to get you a second pair. Take you out sometime. Of course, that would mean letting you leave the house. Not sure I'll manage to do that. We're going to keep you here, just for us, aren't we?"

"We are." Alex tugs hard on Tony's hair, hard enough to hurt. "You're so lovely like this, but you know what I think?"

Tony can't think at all, not like this, not when Alex is keeping him on the edge between pleasure and pain. "What?"

"Terrence, why don't you get the black velvet box?"

"Oh!" Terrence laughs, gives Tony a quick kiss, a light stroke to his cock, then he's gone.

"Alex," Tony says, nearly slurring his words. "What are you up to?"

"You've always been so sweet. You forget, I think, that you were always easy under my hands. So eager, so willing, so submissive." Alex nips one of Steve's bite marks and Tony gasps, feels himself go wetter, even more pliant. "That's it, that's it, come on. All the way." The next bite is even harder, perfect.

"Here we go," Terrence says. He's kneeling now, right up close, and he has a long case in his hands, like jewelers use for necklaces. "Wow, he's really under."

"Not as under as he's going to be. Come on, let's play." Alex keeps Tony's head tipped back, but moves to toy with his nipples, down his stomach to circle his belly button, back up to circle the arc reactor.

Terrence puts a finger to Tony's lips, and Tony nips it. Terrence giggles. "No. Close your eyes. This is a surprise. Right, Alex?"

"That's right."

Tony's all too familiar with blindfolds and surprises, but this is Alex and his husband, and so he shuts his eyes without even thinking about it. The touches aren't unexpected, but they're surprising. Terrence is bold, always has been, too innocent to be as careful as Alex has learned to be, but this touch feels different. Like Terrence is checking him over in different places.

The next touch is icy cold metal.

What?

Oh.

Tony hears his own moan, feels himself lean back into Alex's hold, not to get away but to stop himself from begging.

Terrence doesn't rush, and there's a whole set. Tony wonders why he hadn't recognized the box for what it was. None of his spouses had enjoyed him enough to bother, but--Tony whimpers a little as Terrence tightens one more securely.

"Too much?" he hears Terrence ask.

"No, he likes it. See?" Alex hand is between his legs, trailing in the slick. "Keep going. All of them."

By the time Terrence has finished blinging him out, Tony's a shivering wreck. This is like being in heat, but different, because his brain is still there somewhere. His eyes are resolutely shut, but he can't help the dampness on his cheeks. Alex keeps kissing the tears away, murmuring soft praise and biting his neck hard and kissing it all better.

"There," Terrence says. "All done! You can open your eyes."

He turns out to be holding up a large mirror, angled just right so Tony can see himself. It's--it hurts to see himself like this. Tony has to shut his eyes again, it's just too much for a second.

"No, darling, you're beautiful. Come on. See. Come on."

Tony doesn't want to, tries to turn away, but Alex insists and Tony can't ignore that. Wants to, yes, but can't.

He's kneeling, legs spread, head tipped back, and it's the same damn body he's always had. The arc reactor's like a glowing nightlight stuck in his chest. His skin is still too olive, and he's lost so much weight he looks younger, and his cock is hard, his inner thighs wet, his chest scarred and spattered with flecks of shiny pale scar.

But, he's wearing them all. All the traditional wedding jewels for a young omega taken to a couple's bed to be cherished and used for pleasure. A heavy ruby in his left ear, the stone enormous, simple and perfect. The collar is heavy with rubies, too, but they're flanked by topazes, set in a thin band of Alex's favorite brown leather. Impossibly, there are charms, two of them, on the collar's smooth solid gold D ring. One charm is a fat white diamond and one is topaz. December and November, Alex and Terrence.

The nipple clamps have a diamond and a topaz each, heavy like the old fashioned European royalty liked all those centuries ago. God, Tony hopes to hell he's not wearing some minor country's crown jewels. It would be just like Alex, and the workmanship is exquisite enough, the gold soft enough.

That's not all, though, because Alex knows him, and for all their shared hatred of tradition, they both know the history inside and out.

Like most omegas, his cock is pierced, a simple ring near the tip. He knows the history, knows exactly how that's been used, has played some of those games, voluntarily or not, but he's had once since he was old enough to get it, and he's always been stubborn about keeping what's his.

The jewelry his cock is wearing now is every bit as elaborate as the damn earring. A thick gold ring with a hanging pendant, because no one would expect the lovely wearing this to use their dick to fuck. Tony shifts a bit to see it more clearly, and then he feels the damn thing sway. It's heavy and gorgeous and actually, yeah, Tony can see how maybe this one's more about pleasure. The pendant is big enough to play with, tug on, move around, hold against him, and the pearls hanging from it feel good when Terrence rubs them against his heated skin, the colder metal and jewel drops a chilly contrast.

The ring down at his opening is harder to see, but he can feel that it's there, cold fat gold warming slowly. There's just a flash of sparkle, muted by the shadows cast, but it's there, and he'll feel it each time they fuck him.

The anklet is the last, and it's--he should hate it. The long chain looped around the ankle extends into a fine single chain down the top of the foot to hook around the first toe. More chains create a network tracery of metal and color over the top of his foot. Small jewels and charms hang from each of the chains, shimmering in the light. There's no way to put on socks or shoes or boots.

This is jewelry for someone permanently naked.

The chains lay right over the scars and if you wanted to, you could look at the scattered rubies like drops of blood. The topaz and diamonds meet with the color of his skin, blend with the chain's own gold to reflect back light, but the rubies are dark and distinct. They should read as blood, but they don't.

He looks at himself, looks at his body, and he has to shut his eyes.

"We bought it for you to wear while we play," Terrence says. He's so young and open, and Tony feels so old. What the hell does Terrence think when Tony gets like this? Overcome by something so damn simple. What does Terrence think of the tears?

Alex strokes his hair, and Tony can't even watch that in the mirror.

"You look so beautiful," Terrence whispers.

That makes Tony open his eyes--to shoot him a look of pure disbelief.

"I'm serious," Terrence says, because of course that's what he would say. "Look at you."

Scarred, tired, worn thin--

But Terrence ignores the usual ways they play, forgoes moving him by the hair or with a gentle push. Terrence takes him straight by the D-ring of the jeweled wedding collar and

drags him forward enough so that he can thoroughly kiss him, all bold fierce tongue and a surprisingly amount of teeth.

Tony gives in the way he always does, opening up to the kiss, surrendering.

Behind him, Alex is licking and sucking at his neck. His hands are all over Tony's body, exploring and caressing. When he gets to the jeweled drops on his nipples, he tugs gently. It's not the kind of pain Tony's used to--duller in a way, but still good. Alex plays with them, tugging a little, letting them go, flicking them to make them sway, pinching the clasps to make the clamps bite tighter.

Terrence is fucking his mouth with his tongue now, and that's good, it's distracting, and Tony can just focus on taking in the kiss, try not to notice how much he's reacting to what Alex is doing, try to pretend he's not getting more and more aroused, pretend he's not moaning like a wanton slut.

Finally, Terrence pulls away and Tony tries to follow, but he's trapped by the hold on his collar. He whines, trying to get close again.

"I've been dreaming of your mouth on my cock," Terrence says. "You have the most amazing mouth. But I want to fuck you, too. It's so hard to decide what I want most. What should we do first, Alex?"

And so Tony pants wordlessly, shivers, listens while they discuss what they want, how to use him first, what would be fun to try second. Alex holds his collar while he shares a brief kiss with his husband, murmured endearments, and a few whispers, then soft laughter.

Alex is guiding him forward until his face is resting against a hastily found pillow on the floor. His ass is in the air, and with his arms bound behind him, his weight is on his face and shoulders. It's not how they usually like to have him, but Tony's too far under to care. Every other touch seems to be to adjust a bit of jewelry, to toy with his ankle chain, to caress his earring, to make the heavy pendant on his cock sway.

They spread his legs, and that's more familiar, easier to understand, and maybe they do want to fuck him first.

The soft hands holding him open suggest that, but then there's a sudden bright flash of light and Tony knows they've taken a picture. Christ. Of course, at least this way Steve won't get a gander at god only knows how much rock.

The fingers toying at his wet entrance play with the jewel there, readjust it, move it, and Tony feels his cheeks heat. Or, you know, maybe they will take a picture of him in damn jewelry.

Terrence's hand comes pet his head, stroking his hair, playing with his earring. "You're upset. It's OK, though. We're going to do something you'll really like. It was Alex's idea. But you can always safeword out. Um, do you want to?"

"No I do not want to safeword out," Tony says, shifting so he can look up at him through his messy hair. "What the hell?"

Alex gives him a friendly slap on the butt. "Hey. Terrence plays by nice people rules."

"I am never ever *nice*." Tony lifts his head to turn and glare at Alex. "So if I'm suddenly required to be nice, you might want to say. Or you might want to skip right to the beating part."

"Uh huh." Alex just looks amused. "I forgot how cranky you get when you've been on a three day work bender. Just no sense of humor at all."

"Hey, some of us still work for a living!"

"Neither of us have ever worked for a living, Stark." Alex leans down and bites the join between ass and thigh.

Tony groans loud and wanton right into the carpet, totally unable to stop himself from rubbing his face back and forth into the pillow.

"Wow," he hears Terrence say, impressed. "I didn't know he could do that."

Tony's trying to shove back into the cascading pain and pull away from the hurricane of pleasure and in the end his body just shakes, confused.

Alex hasn't let go, but he loosens his teeth, moves back enough to mouth the bite mark with soft lips and wet tongue.

It's so good and so intense that Tony's shoulders thump to the carpet and he's gasping and nearly coming.

The hand on his collar is unexpected, and at first, Tony can't even parse what it means. The tug is insistent, though, and he gathers himself enough to obey. It's hard, because he feels so good, and so ready, and Alex is touching him, but he has to listen, so he does. When he's pulled himself up a little, hands rearrange him, so his cheek is back on the pillow, but he's facing the other direction and it's easier to breathe--and to be kissed.

Being kissed while Alex works him over is delicious torture and Tony doesn't even try to stop the tears or the moans or any of the sex noises that are just coming out of him now, because this has never been up to him. If they want him to scream, he'll scream, and if they want him to shut up, they can gag him quiet, and if they want him to moan into their kisses, then he'll let go and give in and kiss until the stars fall from the sky.

A breathless endless time later, Terrence is drawing back. Tony catches his breath. He hasn't come, but it's because Alex hasn't let him. As soon as he got close, Alex eased back, until Tony's body is past tension and into a kind of shivering submissive desperation.

Terrence plays with his hair, and that's always nice, almost like the old days, almost like a real lover, and then, when Tony's sleepy-eyed and pliant, Terrence leans down and bites hard right on the mark Steven made on his neck.

Terrence isn't good at this yet, and he's young and strong and he's innocent, so innocent, of what a sensitive O's body can really do, so he bites much harder than he would otherwise and

the pain flows over Tony like the crash of a hard wave, all sudden bright white, the long endless pause, and then a roar of red pain sweeps down all his nerve endings.

But Alex, Alex has been at this forever, and he knows Tony's body, and Tony's responses, chosen and not.

So when Alex bites down on the secret join of thigh and ass, when Alex calls up the answering pain, it's just as sharp, just as hard, and Tony's anchored in between the two points, like he's being rocked in two pairs of arms.

It hurts, god it does, it hurts more than anything, and when it's over, Tony finds he's collapsed completely, sobbing in deep breaths, face wet and mouth open.

There are hands on his shoulders, dragging him up, even though his head is loose on his shoulders, and there are hands on his hips, dragging him up behind, and then clever hands on his wrists, undoing knots and buckles and clasps, until his arms fall in front of him again and he's being braced up, mostly, on all fours. Half held up by himself, half held up by the hands touching him.

But that's not what matters, because there's a soft soft brush against his open mouth. It's Terrence's cock and Tony opens for it like he's never wanted anything else as much in his life. He can feel the heavy weight of it, the gentle musk sweet in his nose, the pulse against his tongue. He's sucking and moaning and taking it in, just as he feels himself being held open, speared from behind. He's so wet and so loose from the pain that it's easy, so easy, to be fucked all the way in on the first stroke.

They rock into him, slow and gentle in pace, but very deep, hitting his throat, shoving into the sensitive depth inside.

Without the pain, he's probably be hyper-aware still. Of what they were doing. Of what he should be feeling. Of thoughts and ideas and responsibilities.

But all that's left is taking them in, letting go, swallowing and surrendering and letting them take their pleasure. There's nothing else, only them, and he stays that way for a long time. Lost in it.

Held.

Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

This takes place about two years ago.

Glossary for drugs in this chapter:
Desirias-a strong disinhibitor used on omegas, usually given without their consent as a rape drug. One of the drugs Senator Fromm used on Tony. Desirias is available by prescription for a few legitimate medical uses, but most Desirias is a street drug.

Alex has always been different.

Dr. Katz used to say, back when Tony was willing to talk about it, that Alex was his only real lover. That Mel had been a fuck buddy before the term was invented and that his experiences elsewhere had been transactions or disasters or distractions or a just a way to meet physical needs or do favors or complete business or soothe heartache or just dull boredom.

Tony'd always thought she was kind of full of shit on this topic, because Tony knows that as much as he loves touching Alex and adores being touched by him, it just isn't the same as it was. Dr. Katz says that's because they both grew up, not just because of trauma, but Tony isn't so sure.

What he does know is that he'd been worried when Alex got married, because while they've never been exclusive, Alex has always been there. His best friend, his close confidant, his business partner. Yeah, those latter parts had mattered, but--

Dr. Katz had made him go actually fucking talk to him. Sometimes Tony really really hated her.

Tony had chickened out, pretended he'd come to talk about a new drug in the works, but Alex knew him too well. Alex had kissed him for a long time, until all his thoughts were gone and there was nothing but touch and taste and smell and warmth. Then Alex had explained, softly, that they were still lovers. Always would be.

"I want to take you to the big house in Virginia, and I want to lay you out in the family bed where I was conceived, and I want to bring Terr there and show him how to make love to you. Darling, Terr's a virgin. Don't you--" Alex stopped, sighed. "Tony, darling, do you really not understand what I want? Why I want you?"

Tony looked down, shook his head. They were friends, and they were lovers, but he'd always known they weren't exactly going to be together. Not partners. Tony isn't partner material.

"Do you remember Mel's Radcliffe Chronicles books?"

Tony wrinkled his nose. "All too well." Trashy porn lightly disguised as 'historical fiction'. Tony'd gotten a long important Talk when one of the damn things had fallen out of his backpack during English class. Granted, the Talk had been more about the overuse of adjectives and the abuse of semi-colons, but Tony hated that shit.

"Radcliffe was the handsome alpha duke," Alex said, as if the eponymous Radcliffe could be anything but. "Each of the Chronicles details his courtship of another spouse."

"A statistically unlikely number of young virginal omegas for that time period in Europe."

Alex knocked his shoulder into Tony's. "Thanks for that mathematical insight. Do you remember Carmella?"

"Uh, no." Tony had read the sexy bits, because he was fourteen and horny, but he wasn't going to admit that.

"Yes you do," Alex said. "Carmella was the typical O. Lusty with ole Radcliffe, a shrinking violet with anyone else, and happy to weave tapestries in the castle tower and no, I do not want to know why that was historically inaccurate. She was the first O. There were a bunch of others, including Aurora and Isabel."

Tony went still.

"Aurora was the beautiful O that Radcliffe captured from the Saracens. Or the Saxons. Whatever. She was a war prize, and her charms were, shall we say, extensive. But what I remember about that story is how she was in bed. Just like you, darling. She was feisty, but she looked so lovely when she cried and struggled that Radcliffe was always finding reasons to spank her and she was always goading him into it and it was, well, I admit that took up a certain amount of my early morning wank fodder."

"Gee, thanks. I think." Aurora had been blonde. Much like Alex's new beau.

"Let me finish. She was one of Radcliffe's favorites, but when she wasn't ordered to warm his bed, where did she sleep?"

Tony crossed his arms. He was not talking about this. "We are not romance heroines."

"Aurora curled up like a blonde kitten in Isobel's bed. I'm sure you remember Isobel, the O Radcliffe married to run his household and raise his children and manage his estates? Tall, willowy, dark." Alex slid his arm around Tony's waist and drew him close, lowered his voice to a whisper, "Isobel drew Aurora down over her knees. She pulled her heavy skirts up to reveal the pert squirming bottom. Aurora didn't mean to be naughty, but she needed attention and petting. She needed a firm hand that would love her the way she needed. Some of her antics were just restless energy--the women in the village would say that she needed to be bred to a young lusty lord, but Isobel thought they were wrong. Such a lord would be all wrong for the sweet Aurora."

"I cannot believe you're quoting a trashy romance novel to me," Tony muttered.

"I can't believe you don't have it memorized." Alex's hand slid up the back of his neck. "Do you remember what happens next?"

"Mel never lent me that one, because someone *stole it*."

"Did they?" Alex sounded amused. "I should probably confess now that the statute of limitations is past. Aurora is in trouble for backtalking the Earl of Greybriar. All the counts think Radcliffe should send Aurora out for bedtraining or put her to the stocks or punish her, but Radcliffe is a good kind master. And Aurora is one of his favorites, because she's so sweet for him. In bed, there isn't anything she won't do. He can have her with his squires, he can bring the beta Lady Diane to his bed and Aurora will be just as good."

Probably drunk, Tony thought grumpily. Who wanted to screw a bunch of squires or some dumb Lady Diane? Aurora should have just run off to find her own fortune, like Vivian did in volume 12. Of course, Vivian got kidnapped by lusty pirates, but still.

"Duke Radcliffe knows that he'll need to do something with Aurora, because even if he gets her out of the trouble with the Earl of Greybriar, she'll likely be in trouble again tomorrow. In many ways, she's perfect. Unlike his other Os, she's never jealous when he fills the bed. She's beautifully eager to please and her lips are very good at sucking cock. When he sits down and thinks about it, the Duke realizes that Aurora is only trouble when she's alone."

"Am I going to like where this story goes?" Tony asked, eyes narrowed. "Because I'm pretty sure I'm not."

"The Duke thinks and thinks and he realizes that Aurora is not like his other Os, who he'd rescued from single marriages. Aurora is the sort of O that a man keeps in bed with his wife."

"Yeah, see, I knew I was going to hate this story."

"The sort who will serve a couple, but who is *happiest* curled in a pile of other Os." Alex lets that hang there for a while. "Where she can please them, but, when her master calls for her, she's willing to do what he wants."

"I'm not looking to curl up in a big pile of Os, Richardson."

"You do it all the time, darling."

"I do not. When have I ever curled up in a big pile of Os?"

"Two weeks ago you had some escort service deliver *thirty two* hot lady Os. I walked in your house and it was like a cross between a slumber party and a porno. I've never seen so many pretty Os engaging in heavy petting and oral sex in my life, and since I'm one of the biggest drug czars in the world, that is really saying something. The other half of the orgy appeared to be highly entertained by snuggling you."

"Maybe I'm nice and warm."

"Tony." Alex laughed. "Whatever you have to tell yourself. So the mighty duke Radcliffe --
"

"Didn't he have thews of steel? I always thought that would be so uncomfortable. What is a thew, anyway?"

"So the Duke sent Aurora to stay with Isobel, unless he summoned her. Isobel enjoyed running the household and when she'd had a long tiring day yelling at the servants and the children and the estate managers and assorted warriors, she tromped back to her own room where Aurora was curled up."

"Like a blonde kitten," Tony said flatly. "Yes, I'm seeing the parallels now."

"No, now you're willfully missing them," Alex said sharply. "Tony, I know you better in bed than anyone. I wish you would quit--"

"Oh great. Here we go. Tony, here's how you're a terrible, terrible slut. I thought I'd be free from that from you, of all people."

"Let me finish my fucking sentence!" Alex was shouting, and he never shouted. "And don't put fucking words in my mouth!"

"*Fine*. Then fucking say what you were going to say. I've got a 2 o'clock."

"You've skipped your 2 o'clock research review meetings for the past six goddamn years, so don't you even start that 'I have a meeting' bullshit with me. What I was going to say is I wish you would quit expecting yourself to get married to please your fucking parents."

Tony rocked back. "Don't you fucking say that to me."

"Who else is going to, Tony?" Alex leaned in, nose to nose. "You know how many hits I've put out on your fucking pinnacle of American patriotism? You know how much money I've blown because I keep remembering how you said you don't blame him? So I fucking cancel at the last goddamn minute and pay anyway?"

"That's not--"

"You keep thinking you're the way you are because of that fucking freak. Tony, there is nothing wrong with you."

"I am broken," Tony hissed, shoving at Alex's chest.

"You really believe that." Alex's teeth clamped together and he was breathing hard, angrier than Tony had seen him since he'd found out one of his suppliers had been trading Desirias. Alex had pulled out a gun and shot him six times, center mass, before the man had finished explaining. Right in the back room of one of the busiest clubs in Manhattan, surrounded by bully boys and syndicate men and gangbangers. Then he'd spit on the dying man's face, and told his lieutenants to take out the trash before it started to smell.

It had been terrifying and, well, kind of smoking hot. In a very wrong sort of way, obviously.

But that didn't mean Tony was going to listen to Alex natter about how healthy Tony was, deep down. "Of course I believe it. It's my goddamn body. I know how I was before, I know how I was after."

"What is it your underpaid shrink always says? It's not the behavior that matters as much as the context we view it in?"

"Christ, don't bring her into this." Tony shoved at Alex's chest again, but he was immovable as stone, always had been, no matter how much Tony worked out.

"Here's what I know. When we made love the first time, you were beautifully wonderfully submissive. Sweet. Bratty. Gorgeous."

"Bratty. Great, just great. That's always how a guy wants to be remembered."

"It's true, and if you think there aren't whole sections of porn stores devoted to bratty submissives, you really haven't been paying attention."

"Yeah, bratty submissives getting trained right, maybe."

"Tony. A lot of us like our bratty submissives to stay bratty. But I am not going to let you derail me."

"You always do."

"Not always. Pay attention. Tony, I tumbled you behind the damn soccer stadium when you didn't even know how to kiss. I was scared out of my mind, but it was so good. You were so good."

"Richardson, I came before you even got it in all the way."

"God, you sure did. Do you have any idea how hot that was? To think I could make it so good for you that you couldn't hold back? To know I could make you whimper and shudder and moan?"

"I don't--" Tony thought about his other lovers. Shook his head. "I got in trouble for that."

"Not with me." Alex slipped his arm around Tony's neck and drew him against his chest. "Never with me. Come here, darling. When you were laid out on the grass, sprinkled in sunlight, laughing at me because I'd left my right sock on, I thought I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

"They always did a good job of sheltering us. Your options for comparison were pretty limited."

Alex knocked their foreheads together. "After all these years, it's still true. You were beautiful. Rolling Stone offered me two hundred thousand dollars for an interview on what it

was like to have Tony Stark's virginity. I turned them down."

"Fromm's been talking about it for years anyway."

"Fuck him. He didn't get you. I did. Not everyone is stupid enough to believe that fucker's lies. But I turned down Rolling Stone because that's my memory. No one else gets to have it."

"Possessive idiot."

"Yes." Alex kissed his jaw. "Tony--you always refuse to read the articles I send you. You don't want to know, but I'm not letting this misunderstanding get between us."

"You're getting married. To someone else. I'd hardly call that a misunderstanding."

"And *you've* gotten married three times."

Tony pulled back, frowned. "You never said a word any of those times."

"What good would it have done?" Alex looks at him straight on. "You'd have said yes anyway."

"I--" Tony shook his head. Would he? Yeah. Probably. "I couldn't say no."

"That's right. Darling, we both know the hand you were dealt. Your family was going to marry you. Nothing I could have done to stop it, not then. I'd always thought--"

They'd never talked about this, and Tony was kind of ashamed to realize he'd never asked Alex what he thought. He'd just assumed, the way he always did, that he knew exactly what Alex thought, what he felt, what he wanted. "What did you want, back then?"

Alex sighed, looked at his hands. "I didn't know any better either, Tony."

"Just tell me. It's not like we get to go back and get a do-over."

"That's not even the do-over I'd pick," Alex muttered. "Well. Anyway. I thought I'd get my degree, since my parents weren't gonna be the bag of dicks yours so obviously were, and then I'd get a job. Not a fancy one, but in engineering. Somewhere close to wherever they'd put you."

"You--" Tony stopped, twisted his hands, looked at the scars. "You thought we'd be, what, special friends? Like that?"

"Yeah." Alex took his wrist, turned it back and forth. "I thought your mom would probably get her way. She was always smarter than the Howard. I figured if you got hooked up with that Dr. Singh it would be easier, but he'd have driven you nuts, so I was kind of hoping for a last minute deus ex machina."

"Weren't we all," Tony said softly.

"I even asked my parents once, after you had that short contract overseas--" Alex stopped. Bit his lip. Looked away. "They said no."

"You asked your parents for a contract with me?" Tony stared, shocked. "Richardson, are you nuts? They'd have flipped their collective shit."

"They didn't, exactly, but they did tell me I just had a crush. They offered--" Alex sighed again. It was almost regretful.

"What did they offer?" Tony asked, because the options were so appalling. Alex had never been contracted out, not even once. His parents had been ridiculously indulgent. Maria always thought it was because the Richardsons had other kids, so having an omega as their oldest wasn't such a big deal, but Tony thought it was simpler. They loved him, that was all.

"They suggested a joint contract. Send you and I to someone for a couple months, together."

Tony's mouth fell open. "Are you *serious*?"

"As a heart attack. My mother turned to my dad and said, 'I bet George Erikson would be a good choice. He's arranged several nice double contracts in his day and the Stark boy is lovely. I'm sure we'd have our choice of suitors.'"

Tony slumped against the couch.

"Obie wouldn't go for it, though. And then your third marriage happened, and everything kind of went off the rails while we tried to make you sure were, you know, OK."

Right. When he was finished being broken. Who'd want their son to marry that mess?

"Tony--" Alex stopped, kissed his forehead. "The best thing that happened to me with TriTech was learning that I wasn't alone. That there are others out there like me."

"I always knew you preferred Os, Alex. It doesn't bother me."

"I know it doesn't, but I also think you don't really understand it."

Tony shrugged. He didn't need to understand it. Alex should have what he wanted, whatever that was. And what Alex apparently wanted was to marry an O. It's not like Tony could give him that, so of course Alex moved on.

"I could shake you, you know. It wouldn't make you see sense, but it might make me feel better." Alex sighed again. "Tony. You know I spend my heats with other Os. That I've had lovers who synced with me."

"I've been with you during a few heats, babe." Tony rarely enjoyed taking the reins, but an Alex desperately writhing under him was very very enjoyable. There was something almost holy about watching Alex's eyes go heavy lidded and soft when Tony sucked his cock like that.

"Yes." Alex played with his hair. "You're enough for me. Terrence will be enough. The two of you together would send me over the moon. But you're not like that. I can be with an alpha. I don't need it, but I didn't find their touch distasteful."

Tony sat up, turned. "What the hell were you thinking? Who was it?"

"I asked Honey for a pro. I wanted to try it. Just a couple times. See what I was missing. I didn't like it much, so I didn't let them go very far."

"If I'd known, I'd have given you a tour. Been with you."

"If you'd been there, it would have been different, darling. "

Right. Ouch. "So did you like it?"

"That's not what I meant. If you were there, I know it would have been good. That's how I work, Tony. I'm a top, and you love being fucked by alphas. Your face when you get good and knotted during heat would be enough to keep me happy, no matter what else happened. We're a matched pair, babe. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"You're really losing me here."

"That's because you always refuse to read the damn articles I send you about--never mind. I'm just like Isobel. I prefer submissive omegas in my bed and I always will. I'm very possessive. I like to fuck them and I like to play with them and, yes, I like to have more than one."

"Which explains why you're marrying a virgin O from a good family." Tony thought he was doing pretty good at keeping his voice flat, despite the hurt.

"Tony, you're still not getting it. You're not like Terrence. He's going to be happy to stay in my bed alone, because he's monogamous. You're not, Tony. You never have been. That's not how you work."

"Yeah, thanks, I always love hearing new reasons for me being a slut. I have to say that I wasn't quite expecting my liberal best friend to pull the biology card, but hey, stranger things have happened."

"Tony. Your preferences match a set of circumstances that used to happen a lot. A really hard line alpha with a stable of lovely Os to bear his kids, to bear his family's kids. You'd enjoy being his, but that's not a position that you're going to be assured. Those hard-liners often have a bunch of Os in and out of their bed. It's not to *your* benefit to require alpha attention all the damn time. You like belonging to both. An alpha's and, well, mine. Do you see?"

"You think I'm designed to belong to a fucking group." Tony Stark, designed for a goddamn gangbang. Fuck that shit.

"No. When's the last time you found a beta attractive?"

Tony tried to think back. "I banged Felicity Christianson at the Greater New York Chamber of Commerce meeting."

"She's notorious for wearing O-pheromone cologne."

"Really?" Huh. Go figure.

"I don't think you can think of anyone you really wanted who was a beta. You fuck them, you like them, but you don't want them."

"I fuck a lot of people I don't want, Richardson."

"I know." Alex turned Tony's wrist this way and that. "But your eyes went wide and delighted when I mentioned a dual contract. Your pupils dilated."

Fucking hell. "It's always nice to think my life could have gone a different direction."

"I don't think that's it, darling. You'd like to belong to me while we belong to someone."

"I don't-" Well, maybe. Alex could probably smell the way he was reacting to that.

"Darling, do you ever imagine me being fucked by someone else?"

Tony shook his head to clear it of the other delightful images crowding his mind. "What? No, not really."

"No or not really?"

"I'd rather be fucked by you both, but I've sometimes fucked an alpha you'd like. You wouldn't like the same things I do, but there are some things you might enjoy, if you went a little outside your comfort zone. I could, you know, set something up, if you wanted to try it."

"What do you think I'd like?" Alex asked softly.

"If I laid the alpha down for you, and you could ride them while I watched. Watched and kissed you, watched you kiss them, watched as they tried and failed to top you. I bet you'd even let me blow you while they mounted you from behind, knotted you, just to make me happy. You'd pet my hair and tell me I was good, but a brat."

"See?" Alex said.

Tony shook his head. He didn't see, except that he was good at coming up with kinky strategies for any situation and any combination of types.

"I'm going to want you in my bed with Terrence," Alex said, watching him closely. "He's a virgin, and I'm going to teach him to fuck you."

Tony flinched, looked away.

"Shhh. Darling, it's OK. You can enjoy it. I want you to. You're my lover, and you're going to stay in my bed just as you always have. I've been very patient with you all these years, haven't I?"

Tony narrowed his eyes at him. "Patient? What, with my fucking around?"

"Yes," Alex said simply. "With your fucking around."

"I've never promised to be faithful. Not once. Don't you fucking use that shit against me, Richardson. Never."

"Tony. I'm trying to tell you that you're not broken, and you keep arguing with me. Fine, you know what, no one else ever has the goddamn guts to just tell you the truth. It's like they think you're going to shatter."

"Maybe they're right." Tony raised his chin.

"Please. You've survived more trauma than a goddamn slasher film franchise put together. You can handle a couple of words."

"Which is why nobody's bothered to say them? Sure, Alex."

"I think you use your body to wreak revenge and make deals and play headgames and remind yourself of how damn broken you supposedly are."

"Actually, my shrink says that to me regularly, but thanks for confirming her damn diagnosis."

"Has she said that I love you? That I've always loved you? That I'm possessive and that I hate how you fuck around? That I've always hated that I'm not enough for you? That I know I'll never be enough, and sometimes, I just want to grab you by the hair and keep you with me until I can fucking convince you for once that it's OK to love being hurt and to love being fucked and to love all the things that you love?"

"It's not-- it's not that you're not enough for me." Christ. How did he even get himself into this shit? "We're not close the way we were. You have work and I have work and half the time we don't even make it to the same time zone more than once every couple three months."

"That doesn't change that I love you," Alex said impatiently. "But you know what? Fine. I'm going to say it all. Pay attention for once in your life to what I'm actually saying instead of what you think I'm saying."

Tony crossed his arms and glared. "Fucking say it, then."

"You've been my lover since I took your damn virginity under our tree at school. Our initials are still carved in that fucking oak. We have never ever broken up. I was your lover before Fromm got his sociopathic hands on you. Darling, I took you *hunting*. None of your marriages, none of your affairs, none of your fucked up business deals changes that we're lovers. You gave yourself to me and not once have you said that you're not still mine. When

I ask you to visit me, you clear your schedule and show up. Do you have any idea how many times Pepper has read me the riot act for fucking up major SI deals because you didn't bother to mention that you dropped multi-billion dollar negotiations to fly to Virginia to bring me ice cream and give me a blow job because a minor pipe line contract fell through?"

"That was only a couple times," Tony muttered. "And you'd only just gotten Price really going and--"

"You wanted to cheer me up. Tony, I know. It took me a long time to understand you. To understand us. I've never stopped loving you, and I'm never going to. I could have married any number of lovely young Os. I picked Terrence because he isn't going to come between us. Darling, I had you written into my contract with him."

"Jesus, Alex!"

"What do you take me for? You're not a dirty secret."

"Maybe I should be."

Alex made a noise of supreme frustration and gave his shoulders a little shake. "I asked my matchmaker to concentrate on female candidates because you like them, you idiot. I wrote you into the process. And you know what?"

"What? No, let me rephrase, What fresh hell is this, or maybe I should say, How the motherfucking love of god did we even get into talking about this fucking appalling topic and I thought you hated marriage counselors and the whole stupid patriarchal marital arrangement system."

"We can talk politics some other time. I wasn't going to force anyone to do anything, but I needed some help looking for candidates who met specific criteria."

"What, like being blonde virgin kittens?"

"I am never living down that story."

"Yeah, probably not. Hell, definitely not."

"You're the blonde virgin kitten, Stark. I've got my virginal kitten-- I didn't need a second one."

"I thought you said--"

"Terrence is a virgin because he's chosen to be, not because it was on my requirement list! Listen to me. I sat down with Christine from Millennial Matching to talk about what I wanted. I asked her if she'd ever arranged a marriage with a lover in mind and do you know what she said?"

"Usually only for alphas with really big fat cocks?"

"'All the time,' she said. Tony, she had a whole second set of forms for your preferences."

"Nice that you filled them out for me."

"What the hell did you expect me to do? Oh hey, Tony, I know you're currently off killing insurgents in the Middle East, but when you get a chance, can you tell me if you like cut or uncut O cock? That'd have gone over swimmingly, I'm sure. Hey, Stark, on a scale of one to ten, how important is it that your lovers' spouse arrange a pleasing dinner table when you visit? How about, Will it bother you if your lover's spouse is also extremely submissive?"

Tony opened his mouth to argue and found the word falling out. "Yes."

"Yes?" Alex looked surprised. Fucking fair enough, because Tony was surprised too.

"Yes, it would bother me. OK? It would bother me. Is that what you fucking wanted to hear?"

"Oh, sweetheart." Alex tugged him into his arms, and dragged them down on the couch. Tony was stiff the whole way, and he turned his head even when Alex rolled on top. "Hey, shh, I shouldn't have given you that one as an example. I didn't think about it, but that's part of what I was trying to tell you. Christine has a lot of experience doing this, because it's not unusual, it happens all the time. Darling, can you look at me?"

No, he couldn't. "Don't call me darling."

Alex tightened his grip, but Tony was getting out of this conversation. He shoved hard and Alex shifted his grip and then it was like school all over again. They were wrestling and scuffling and then falling off the couch to thump hard on the floor. Tony scrambled up, but Alex was just as quick.

"Unless you safeword out, I'm going to keep you here," Alex said, panting, arms wrapped around his waist.

"Fuck you," Tony said, jerking to the side and going down hard on one knee.

"You think I can't?"

"I think you won't." Tony twisted away, but Alex was surprisingly agile. Tony could feel the hard edge of Alex's gun digging into his back, but that just made it better. "I think I'm just too much effort to bother--*oof*."

Alex had been serious about those hand to hand lessons with his men, apparently, because Tony was now face down on the floor, one hand painfully up behind him, Alex's knee digging into his spine. Alex was breathing heavily. "Safeword out or I'm going to keep going."

Tony shut his eyes and shivered. "I can't believe you talked to your matchmaker about my sexual preferences."

"I filled out two hundred questions about how you like to be fucked, Stark. I asked Jarvis for help with some of the other questions."

"Jesus Christ. I never should have given you J's overrides."

"I didn't have to use my overrides. He was thrilled to answer." Alex bent down and breathed into his ear. "But I loved the video he showed me of you having a party with nothing but lovely female Os where you pleased all of them while they kissed each other and petted you. I had no idea that was such a thing for you, but one of these days, I'm going to arrange it for your birthday and I'll stay and watch."

Tony tugged at his arm, but Alex had it pressed tight. If he pulled too much, he'd dislocate his shoulder. Alex's men did not play nice. Neither did Alex. It was-- heady. "What did your damn matchmaker say?"

"That if your lover is an extreme omega, especially a true one, one that's that way by nature, like you, they'll feel very threatened if you add another one to the marriage. It's not that your type doesn't enjoy playing with other submissives, but you need to know your place."

"At the bottom," Tony said, bitter.

"In the center of the bed," Alex corrected, teasing his teeth right on his neck. "For everyone to make love to. They like to know they can just give in to their lovers and that giving in will please their person."

"You saying I want to please Terrennnnnnce?" Tony sneered the name, hating every syllable of it.

"No, darling. I'm saying you want to please me. And you'll let Terrence fuck you if I want to watch. If I've had a hard day, you'll just spread your legs and let us both have you, until I feel better. If he's bored and horny, he'll be able to just drag you to the floor and have his way with you, because you're both mine and making him happy pleases me. That's what Christine said works well. And don't lie to me, Tony, I can smell how hot this is making you."

Tony jerked away, was caught by the pain, struggled a little despite it, but gave in when Alex shifted more of his weight over him.

"That's it. Good boy. God, you love it. That's what I'm telling you, darling. It's normal. You're normal. You want to belong, you always have, and you never forgot who had you first. You're so loyal, darling, and so taken. It's just that the world doesn't see us this way yet. I know you need to be knotted, darling. I know you need both. But this part, this part of you is mine. You're right, we haven't been close these last years, but that's mostly you. Because you were-- well, I thought you were moving on."

Tony did jerk away this time, thought desperately of safewording out, let his throat open, tried to get the words out, but Alex just let his arm go, let him get up enough to scramble away.

Tony took it for the escape it was, shoved to hands and knees, pulled out of Alex's grip to make it a few feet before he was tackled down, hard, and Alex's full long weight pressed him down.

"I thought you'd gotten over me," Alex whispered. "I thought you didn't want me anymore. I was ready to let you go, because I thought you were making a move on Pepper at last."

"Jesus." That was so fucked up, Tony whipped his head around. "Are you crazy?"

"Probably. The papers all think so. Power hungry O makes play for new manufacturing site. Reputed drug king pin donates millions to unorthodox reproductive clinic. Infamous banking scion speaks to congressional aides about pharmaceutical abortions, protestors flock steps of Senate building."

"Fuckers."

"We've been busy, Tony, but for a while you flat out avoided me. What was I supposed to think when I'd come into town and Jarvis told me you'd left for fucking South America an hour after I landed?"

"Um. I can explain." See, it was just that I was dying, and it'd be easier on you if you thought I was an asshole. Right. That just never seemed to go over with his friends the way it did in his simulations.

"You really can't. I'm sure it boils down to some scheme like the time you doped the campus fountains to smell like lemonade and look purple. There was an explanation for that one, too, but no one could parse it."

"It was an Easter theme!"

"Naturally. Hence the lemons and the *purple*. Of course."

"It's-- never mind."

"That's what I decided. You thought about breaking up with me, but for some reason, you changed your mind. I wasn't going to press, baby, I was too busy being glad. But it did make me start thinking about the future."

"Yeah, so you decided to get marrrrrrriiiiied."

"Only because I finally accepted you weren't going to marry me."

Tony rolled over and stared up at him, appalled. "Are you fucking with me?"

"No." Alex looked down at him, beautiful, so familiar, but also looking tired. Almost...hurt.

Tony covered his face with both hands and groaned. "I'm not marrying anyone. It's not personal, Alex."

"I know." Alex took his hands away, pressed his wrists down on either side of his head. "But I want *something* permanent with you. Something we can both rely on. I spent a lot of time thinking and a lot of time reading. One of the academics has a new sexual preference system, especially for omegas. You're what she calls an A-R type Tony. It's a perfectly natural occurring sexual preference and it happens especially often in extreme omegas. According to her research, about forty-six percent of Roanokes are extreme submissive A-R types."

Tony jerked his chin to the side, baring his neck, but hiding his expression.

"A-R means that you usually have a longterm omega partner. It also means that you respond very strongly to alpha pheromones during heat and prefer, sometimes need, to be knotted repeatedly. Most A-Rs can respond sexually to a number of partners during a heat, if their primary partner is present and approves."

The shame flooded his belly, and Tony turned his chin further, trying hard to submit enough. But it wasn't enough. It was never enough.

"Darling. It's not wrong. It's not bad, it's *beautiful*." Alex brushed a kiss over the exposed line of Tony's throat. "I really do want to go back in time and kill your parents myself."

"Yeah, that'd be the exact thing I'd use a time machine for, oh wait, no I wouldn't."

"That will of theirs was unconscionable. Giving you to Obie, tying you to SI that way, there was so much fucked up about it. So much that fucked you over. If they'd the sense god gave a goat they'd have given your guardianship to my folks or to Na Anderson. Someone who actually had experience raising a teenager, someone who gave a damn about your life."

Tony swallowed. Neither of those were options that figured prominently in his what-if games. "Your parents never much liked me."

"Yes, they did," Alex said. "They thought you were charming. Did you know they tried to invite you to our summer vacation in Del Mar?"

"You never told me that. When was that?"

"When we were twelve. Your old man lost his tiny mind, as he was wont to do. Threatened to pull strings and have the SEC audit our banks. I overheard Dad talking to a friend of his about it, and they both said the same thing-- that Howard Stark was fucking unhinged."

Tony grunted. "Most people think he was the patriot's patriot."

"My mom got her degree in biochemistry and she worked with someone who did genetics testing on Hiroshima survivors. It's not a universal opinion, Tony."

"You never complained that I built weapons."

"That's because I trusted you a lot more than I trusted your father. Tony, my point is that, look, in the natural course of the world, if you'd had normal fucking caring adults guiding your future, things would have looked some differently."

"And you think I'd have married you? Or not? Or what?"

"Here's what I think," Alex said carefully, gripping Tony's chin and turning his face so he could watch his eyes. "We'd have stayed lovers. One day, you'd have caught an alpha's eye. Someone sane. Someone very dominant."

"And I'd have left you."

"No. We'd have wound up together, all of us, somehow. Whether I like alphas or not, I do like you. I'd have married into that, if that's what you needed."

Tony's eyes widened. "But you don't need that."

"That's right." Alex kept hold of his chin, leaned down and kissed him. "But I do need *you*."

"You don't really have me."

"I have as much you can give me." Alex's eyes were so sad, and Tony looked away again. God, he hated himself. Hated his body. "Tony, no. You're fine. You've always given me so much. You go under for me, you relax in my bed, you laugh. I bet there's no one else in the world who knows that Tony Stark laughs during sex."

"Only because you have this habit of rolling us off the side of the bed and onto the damn floor by accident."

"Uh huh." Alex kissed the line of his throat again. "Darling. I love you. I'm trying to tell you that what you give me is real. I'm trying to give you something back. I'm marrying Terrence, and sometimes, just like an alpha-beta couple would, I'm going to have my beautiful omega lover in the marriage bed. I'd write us a contract if I thought you'd accept it, but it's the tradition that matters. That you're part of us, part of something, loved. Cherished."

That just hurt too much, and it didn't make any damn sense. Tony did what he always did, he shoved at Alex enough to get him to shift up, and then he rolled over. "You can have that. If you want. But I don't need-- those words. It's not-- you can just fuck me. If you want. And your hus-- and Terrence can, he can fuck me too. If he wants."

Alex sat back, resting on Tony's upper thighs. He laid his hands flat on Tony's back, rubbed his shoulders. "Someday, I want you to stay. Not just for a night or two, but for a while. As ours. It's not going to happen soon, I understand that, I accept that, but I want you to consider it. Someday. As a favor. A Christmas present, a birthday present, a wedding present, an anniversary present, whatever."

"In Virginia?"

"If you like. I do like to fuck you in the ancestral bed, and you like fixing the ancient wiring. But it doesn't have to be there, it could be here, it could be in Manhattan. It could be at your house, if you wanted."

"You hate Stark House."

"I hate that you need Stark House, Tony, I don't hate the house itself."

Meaningless distinction. "Whatever."

"No. But I'll let it go for now. Darling, someday, I think, I *hope*, you'll find an alpha that you genuinely care about. I understand more than most that you may never enjoy the sex with them."

"Hey!"

"Hey yourself. Darling, your heats have always been tricky. They go better if you're knotted. I don't care what Pepper says about this, I *know*. You need that, but I've never believed you much like it."

"No one's complained."

"Of course they haven't. You make it very good for them, and I don't doubt that your pros can make you come. Tony-- that's part of who you are. It's OK. But just because you come doesn't mean you enjoy it, right?"

Tony gave up and rolled away. Alex let him.

"Tony. I'd like you to have someone for companionship, someone who can mount you during your heats, someone who can sire children on you when you're ready."

"I'm so done talking about this."

"Well, I'm not." Alex got a pack of cigarettes from the side table, lit one. "When I was up in Canada, I stayed with a good friend. Emily Rivero. Up in the far north, they sometimes go a little more traditional."

Tony sat up and stole Alex's cigarette. It was one of his Indonesian cloves, heady and sweet. "What, a big bear sized alpha to keep everyone safe, a momma O to raise the kiddies, a couple pretties to warm the bed, and all the beta cousins filling up the rest of the manse?"

Alex brushed Tony's hair back from his eyes. "Not too far from that, yes. Emily's family didn't have much money, but she was beautiful and an extreme O. She's a Wilcox, and that's very valuable up there. Her family arranged a contract, but it went badly. She lost the baby, and she wasn't quite the same after."

"Yeah, this is a lovely bedtime story. I can see why you get all the tail." Tony got up and went looking for the Scotch. Alex preferred brandy, but he kept a full bar. Tony didn't like to think about why there was always a selection of finest single malts, but only one mediocre gin, no matter how much Alex's business partners liked a gin martini. Tony was also a business partner, that's all, that's why the Scotch.

"So, after a time," Alex said, watching him, "Emily fell in with Maya Campbell. Maya's a more moderate O. Not dominant like me, but a more run of the mill type, and what Emily said to me was that she loved spending time with Maya, and she enjoyed fooling around, and it was just an easy sort of thing. It's Sunday, after supper, and Maya's not looking forward to work tomorrow, and so Emily climbs into her lap and then they're laughing and kissing."

"Uh huh." So very like his own life and relationships, obviously. Tony's never climbed into someone's lap and laughed and kissed them. Well, there was that one time, before his first damn marriage, when Alex had been having trouble with social studies tests, and Tony'd decided they should try some non-conventional study techniques... But no. That was before he'd been broken. Tony spun the cap of the Scotch bottle on the table.

"But," Alex continues, "after a couple years, it was clear it wasn't enough. Not for either of them, and it wasn't because they didn't care for each other. So when Emily met Liam Thompson, and he wanted to court her, she talked to Maya about it. Thompson has a big family up north, and eventually, they both moved up there."

Tony knocked back both fingerfuls of Scotch.

"Emily says that she only really enjoys the sex during her heats. She's borne him two children." Alex dragged on his cigarette and met Tony's eyes. "Both of those children were sired with at least one friend of Liam's present. No one up there thinks anything of Emily preferring to spend some nights in Maya's bed. Liam's talking about having Maya helping sire Emily's next child."

Tony took the bottle of Scotch and poured out more. A lot more. "Gee, you know the most progressive people. I'm sure Emily's just thrilled that her big old alpha's deciding who gets to knock her up."

"Condescending disapproval of other people's legitimate choices is very much a part of patriarchal bullshit, darling. It's only a choice if she gets to fucking *choose*. Insisting that Emily feel broken and be barren for the rest of her life is not what I'm fighting for. It's her right to decide what she wants."

"And you actually think that's what she wants? Jesus Christ, Richardson, you just got done telling me the girl was sent out to a bad contract because her folks were broke."

"She did and she was, but she's now the area manager for Tri-Tech's entire Canadian arm. Tony, she's the primary breadwinner for her whole damn county. Hell, she employs more people up north than the damn logging industry."

Tony grunted, dragged on the cigarette. "What's your fucking point?"

"My point is that if you find an alpha you like, that you actually care about, I'm not going to leave you. If you want him, and yes, Tony, I know it's going to be a him, then I'm fine with that. If he treats you right, I won't say a single word against him."

The Scotch burned a long path down his throat as he swallowed. "You think I'd like to belong to more than one person."

Alex got up and stepped in behind him, wrapped his arms around his belly, drew him back against his chest. "Yes, darling, I do. In fact, I'm counting on it. Otherwise, Terrence is going to be very disappointed. I told him I'd be asking you to belong to us."

Tony closed his eyes, finished the Scotch. He was perilously close to tipping his head back against Alex's shoulder, familiar, easy, right. "So what would you do if I did find a nice alpha stud?"

"After I threatened him with violence if he hurt you, I'd pop the champagne. But you need to understand something, darling. You can leave me, if you truly want."

"I thought you said you wouldn't break up with me if I found myself a fella."

"I won't. That doesn't mean you wouldn't leave me."

Yeah, right, like that would happen. Alex nuzzled his neck, and Tony shivered.

"I hope you won't. I'd fight to keep you. But if you wanted to, I'd let you go," Alex said. "What I'm trying to tell you is something else. If you chose an alpha, choose to belong to him, it's not a choice you're making on your own."

"Because you'd be making sure he's good for me?"

"No, darling." Alex's mouth moved on Tony's neck, kissing, licking, arousing him with little drags of his teeth. He bit down and tugged the skin between his teeth until Tony lost the grip he'd had on the glass and it fell to the carpet. Alex's hands held him up, held him close. "Do you remember when I showed up at your downtown office and fucked you on your desk until you screamed?"

"Yes," Tony said, feeling drugged. "You just walked in, kicked the door shut, and hauled me around. I don't know what the hell got into you, but god it was good."

"Mmm." Alex chose another spot on his neck, lower down, and gripped it with his teeth.

Tony whimpered, because he knew what happened next, knew what Alex would do when he was like this. And yes, there it was, Alex adjusting his grip so he had that bit of skin right between his teeth, sucking a little, loosening Tony up, and then growling softly as he tugged back and forth like a terrier with a rat. Tony's knees went weak and Alex's hold was all that kept him from falling. He felt himself lowered to the floor, felt Alex start to pull up his shirt, undo his belt.

Finally.

"I'd just got done talking to Emily the week before, and the matchmaking service got back to me that Terrence was willing to let me sire a child on you, if we could find an alpha to fuck you with me."

"You-- what?" Tony reached back, drawing Alex closer. "You can't be serious."

"Very. I can smell what it's doing to you, Tony. I can smell your arousal. And you don't have to say a word, just let me have you."

Tony braced his hands in Alex's Persian carpet, stared at the pattern of leaves and vines, wondered what the hell had happened to his orderly life. "But you could have asked for that a long time ago. It's not easy, but there are drugs these days, make it possible for an O-O pairing to be fertile."

"I don't just want an O-O baby, I want to fuck you with whoever you've chosen. Don't you understand? That's what I need, too. I don't want to be your only husband, I want to take you together. You need that, and I want to make you happy."

Tony buried his face on his forearms. "I don't understand you at all."

"I know." Alex kissed the mark he'd left on his neck. "Will you let me have you tonight?"

"Do I ever say no to you?"

Alex rested his face against his neck, kissed his favorite spot there. "I need you so much. Will you let me have you? Please?"

Tony shuddered all over. "You don't have beg. You shouldn't ever have to beg. Take me as hard as you want. I want you to."

But Alex didn't. He pulled all of Tony's clothes off, impatient, demanding, and let Tony undress him, an indulgence Tony reveled in. Finally naked, Tony leaned his head back, bared his throat, moaned wantonly for his touch. The whole night, Alex fucked him slow and sweet, kissed him hard, marked him like he was owned.

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Chapter 61

Steve reads some articles on physiological responses to stress while he waits for Natasha to return. He sent her out a couple hours ago to deal with Tony's request about Bogota, but SHIELD was also doing some field test practice runs today. Steve knows she'd planned to help out with training exercises, and he'd told her it was fine if she wanted to stay at SHIELD for a while.

Steve could use the time to think, to be honest. To be alone. As wonderful as it is to have Tony, as much as Steve enjoys his company, it's a relief, in a way, to have Tony absent from the house not just for a moment, but a set time, gone but *safe*.

This is nothing like the times when Tony just vanishes for a couple of days. He'll return from California or North Dakota or a war zone, looking exhausted, sporting scrapes or bruises, bringing paperwork or SI projects, confiscated weapons or terrifying technology, smelling of sex with strangers and sometimes of blood, the faint overlaying scent of forged iron muted by the too-sharp smell of the arc reactor, the tendons in his neck standing out even more sharply, the hollows under his cheeks made prominent, more weight lost to the illness no one seems able to help and Tony insists is nothing.

Steve knows there are always reasons for the things Tony does, even if the reasons only become clear in retrospect, but the two them have become closer. Not just from the dating, but from quiet evenings playing poker, eating breakfast, watching cartoons.

The Helicarrier fight had not startled Steve as much as it should probably should. He knows how he feels about Tony, he understands, or thought he understood, what his body was doing, what it was capable of, the subtle bonds tying him to his mate and drawing the whole pack inexorably together.

It *is* frightening, in this strange new world, to hand over control to someone else. To say, here, in all this terror and confusion and pain, when I'm lost, when my body gives in to the battle it's losing, you can have me. You can control me.

I trust you.

With the Commandos, Steve had buried himself in Jolene or Ezra or the warm curl of bodies after they'd all returned to camp, his men and their omegas coming together in the musty-smelling tents to wash all of the wounds, to check for hurts, to soothe the pain inside and out with touch and taste and smell and the occasional sharp scrape of teeth marking a bite into skin--ours, never alone, belonging.

But that had been a full pack, a “bachelor band,” as their army doctor had called it, a travelling mix of strong males in prime fighting condition, hardened by war and bonds forged of blood and gunpowder, their mates in the center of the pack, courted or won, but as much a part of their fight as a man's fist was in a bar brawl.

Tony is different.

This pack is different.

So no. It's not the Fight itself that's such a concern. Any hardline alpha leader would feel Fight if a powerful someone threatened to remove two pack members, especially if the pack members are their as-yet-unbonded mate and the other is a scientist so vulnerable to pressure he has to wander.

It's not even Fury, or Fury's machinations, that are such a problem. Barton's words had startled Steve out of his spiraling panic. Sure, they weren't tactfully worded. Sure, they were pretty obnoxious.

But they were also probably *right*.

For a long time now, Steve has been working under the assumption that, in their own way, SHIELD had been patching over his broken places. Giving him a team. A place to live. And yes, Tony, to warm his bed.

Tony's theory, that Ross's threat-display had been a ploy, a goad against Steve's throat, a snarl poised over his jugular, had shaken Steve more than he wanted to admit.

SHIELD gave him Tony, to soothe all of the cracks the ice left in his mind, and now someone is using Tony to break him open all over again, to shatter Steve's control until he smashes.

Tony said that he doesn't mind controlling Steve, that he doesn't mind being fucked into next week if it keeps Steve calm, that he *wants* to do it, but there's a huge difference between what the world tosses at you by happenstance and what vulnerabilities a villain deliberately chooses to exploit.

Steve couldn't bear it if someone used Tony's sex as a weapon again. Too many people have used it, too many people have taken Tony's glorious submission and alluring scent and lithe body and turned it from a gift into a stiletto.

So.

Maybe Fury had sat down and designed a welcome to the new world package for Steve, maybe Fury had wrapped that package in a bow and handed it over. Here's a sniper, here's an assassin, here's a warrior, here's a scientist, here's a mate, here's a life purpose, here's a battle, here's a bully to defeat.

And maybe, somewhere in the belly of this dark new world, someone else had turned around and unwrapped Steve's package and begun dismantling the presents, destroying the gifts, until Tony was one more pawn in the game to make the ideal soldier. A pawn used and then thrown down like a bloody rag doll when its use was done.

But maybe not.

Maybe Barton is right. Maybe the purpose of the exercise is not Steve.

In which case, maybe the villain pulling the puppet strings is not here to destroy *Steve's* psyche, is not trying to make him like Romanoff's modern torture victim, an isolated man

stripped of all social ties so he will cling to the next kind hand stretched out above him.

Maybe the purpose of the exercise is *Tony*.

And so, while Tony curls up like a kitten in a bed smelling of sex and friendship and love, dressed in jewels and treated like a treasure, Steve is sitting in their living room, drawing tactical maps in the air of his mind, surveying the land, sending out scouts, gathering intel.

Thinking.

*

Steve's moved on to writing field work manuals (useless, boring busywork, but it seems to make the administrators happy and he supposes they have to have something to put in their fancy three ring binders) when his phone vibrates.

He flicks his thumb across the screen the way Tony taught him, knowing that Jarvis's security has already read his thumbprint for biometric analysis (much faster than some stupid alphanumeric entry because we're not in the 40s anymore, Tony had muttered).

"Captain Rogers speaking."

"Good morning, Captain. This is Sa Richardson. I wondered if I might have a moment of your time?"

Steve smiles, throws down his pen, sits back. "Of course you can. How's Tony?"

Sa Richardson's voice softens, just for a second, "He's doing well. Would you like to see?"

"Yes."

Steve's phone vibrates a second later. He pulls it away from his ear; it's hard to get used to the way a flat piece of glass and metal can do so many things at once. But if this is incentive to learn to accept speakerphones and instant messaging and photos by email, Steve's pretty darn happy to learn.

The picture is of Tony, of course, but it's not sexual. Not in that way.

Tony's curled up in a patch of sunlight, asleep. It's obviously a bed, but a much bigger bed than Steve's ever had. The sheets are soft cream and they make a lovely contrast to Tony's olive skin.

Tony's body language is nothing like he'd been on the Helicarrier, when Steve had scent marked him in Steve's bed. Then, Tony had been languid but still wary, stretched out where Steve had moved him, but not truly at ease. Even when Tony sleeps in his armchair in the living room, he's isolated, alone. Steve's seen Tony fall asleep against Honey's arm when they're watching movies sometimes, and it's a little better, Honey will sneak an arm around him, and Tony won't draw away in sleep, just sigh softly and breathe a little easier, but he's still got a wariness to him even if he's drooling into her tee shirt.

Sometimes, to Steve's secret jealousy, Tony will fall asleep on the couch watching cartoons, and if Clint's home, he'll just know.

Several times Steve's wandered into the living room to find Tony asleep on the couch, Roadrunner going on the TV, and Clint nearby, guarding him with bow or knife or small deadly device of an unknown origin.

Clint's always looked at Steve and nodded, respectful.

It's good, it's *right*.

Steve knows it's because Clint and Tony are closer now, that Tony has granted Barton a small sliver of hard won trust, but Steve still wishes that Tony's breathing didn't change and his body didn't shift when he'd sense Steve's presence, even in sleep, and become restless, afraid.

Clint always looks guilty, always shoots Steve a wry grimace, but he doesn't ever deny Tony's body's request.

It's beautiful, actually, the choreographed way that Clint will slide from utterly still sniper to gracefully standing warrior, no limbs gone stiff or asleep, and shift, so he's edging Steve back, back, until Tony's body relaxes again.

The first time it happened, Steve'd almost pushed back. It's his right, as their leader, to be as close into Clint's personal space as he wants. It's sure as heck his right to be as close to their omegas as he wants, but Clint's also his beta. The calm guardian who stands at the gate, and Steve listens to him, even if his heart is a few heavy slow steps behind.

So seeing Tony in Sa Richardson's bed, curled up in actual true real sleep, is such a revelation that Steve can't say a single word.

He just stares.

Tony's body is as boneless as a cat sleeping in a patch of warm sunlight. His shoulders are relaxed, the heavy muscles he uses at the forge gone slack, the beautifully sculpted biceps at ease. Even Tony's hands are uncurled, the fingers loose, the palms open, so Steve can see one of the small healing cuts Tony picks up in the workshop all the time, and the fine tracery of scars glimmer in that warm gold sunlight.

The jewelry should be a shock, but Steve's used to seeing it in these photos now. It suits Tony so well that it's natural. Tony's so asleep, so at ease, the cradle of his hips and the join of thighs are in full view. Steve wants to reach through the screen and run his finger along that elegant line of abdominal muscle that goes from the top of Tony's hip down to his pubic bone, the one that's so sharp in true males like Steve, but that's softer, subtle, in omegas.

The blankets and sheets on the bed are shoved mostly aside, behind Tony's back and thighs like someone's made him a nest there.

There is not one single line of tension anywhere in his body, and Steve aches for his drawing pencils like a kick to the heart.

"Captain?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry, Sa Richardson. Still getting to used the speakerphone."

"Certainly. What do you think of the picture? It's not quite like the one I sent this morning."

Steve can't help but smile at that--he's getting used to being teased. That photo had been delightfully naughty. Tony on hands and knees, legs spread, the evidence of lovemaking trickling out of his wet entrance as he looked back over his shoulder and just dared the viewer to fuck him again. The dancing laughter in his eyes, the quirk of his eyebrow, the absolutely bratty sultry pout--

Steve's hand had been down his pants before he remembered to check that he was alone.

"I like both pictures," Steve says. "They're quite similar, actually."

"Do you think so?"

"I do." Two can play teasing word games.

"I'm curious what makes you say that." Sa Richardson's voice *is* mildly curious, but Steve's good at reading people, and he can hear the line of quiet ice that lives under that polite cultured voice. Steve is very intimate with the dangerous power of ice.

Maybe he should stop playing. "Tony's relaxed. In both photos."

"Yes. Yes, he is." After the briefest pause, Sa Richardson goes on. "Captain, I wondered if you might have time to speak with me today. I'll be in the neighborhood on business most of the morning."

"I'd like that very much. Whatever time works best for you is fine by me. I'll move my schedule around."

"11 o'clock then. I'll have Jarvis give you directions."

"Thank you," Steve says, sincere.

Neither of them pretend it's about the directions.

*

Jarvis directs Steve to change from SHIELD gear into something freshly laundered at home. His personal cell phone, his Stark House keys, his wallet, those can come with him. His SHIELD tech, his field comm, his SHIELD badges, even his SHIELD clothing, those have to stay behind.

Steve decides to take a taxi instead of his bike, since parking can be complicated and he doesn't want to be late.

The meeting is in Central Park, under a particular tree that Jarvis guides him to.

As Steve walks through the trees and bushes, he looks for men in dark suits, but he doesn't see any. There's a few people out despite the cold, but none of them look like thugs. Some women, a young omega taking a child for a walk in a stroller, some older kids, a few old men.

Possibly Steve is looking for the wrong tells.

Sa Richardson is leaning against the tree, looking up into the branches. It's an oak and very old, has been there since well before Steve's time by the looks of it. There's nothing distinguishing about this tree. It's huge and old and beautiful, but there are many others just like it in the park. Maybe it's the line of sight--the tree is in a clearing, edged by stone walls, ornamental bushes, saplings, and there is no higher ground.

Sa Richardson is wearing a long black coat over another dark suit, but he doesn't have on gloves or a scarf. If he minds the cold, he doesn't say, but Steve is just as glad. He'll be able to scent any subtle shifts of scent this way, despite the chilly wind.

"Good morning, Captain," Sa Richardson says, giving the bare branches above him a last look before turning. "Thank you for meeting with me."

"It's my pleasure," Steve says, because it's the truth. He approaches cautiously. The personal space rules are different this century. Sa Richardson is Tony's good friend, and an unbonded omega. Steve would like to lean next to him against the tree so they can talk quietly, but it might come off as forward. Of course, Sa Richardson has been sending him dirty pictures on his phone, so maybe Steve's allowed some leeway.

Sa Richardson takes out his cigarette case. "Would you like one?"

"I'm not sure what they are," Steve admits.

"Indonesian cigarettes. They have cloves and spices in addition to good tobacco." Sa Richardson doesn't seem to mind explaining, and he doesn't sound condescending or offended.

"Thank you." Steve takes one. It's good manners, and despite his previous asthma, he doesn't mind smoking. It reminds him of poker night and Tony on Sundays, lazy and content.

"I thought you might have some questions about the meeting we had at SHIELD."

Thank god. "Is it safe here?"

"Yes. I've got a sensory block set up around this tree, and the branches shield us from satellite photos."

So it had been about line of sight, though not from the side. Steve's never forgotten about air in combat, but it takes some getting used to the way aerial photographs are used as weapons in life now. "Thank you. What's Wrath? Why was Agent Rowland so eager to arrest you for it?"

"Wrath is a chemical weapon," Sa Richardson says. "That's what Tony and I call it. It's a drug that artificially induces a true Fight state in both alphas and betas. It's one of our special creations, and it's difficult to manufacture. No one has been able to replicate its effects or reproduce the formula. We sell it very, very rarely and only under certain circumstances. The case I gave Phil contains just enough doses for a regiment. You dissolve each pill in several liters of appropriate liquid according to specific directions. It can be give orally, for a slower drop into the Fight state, or by injection for a quick induction."

"The men taking it don't need to be pack-bonded? They don't need an omega present?"

"That's correct." Sa Richardson picks a dead grass stem off his knee. "That's why it's a weapon. An army could use it to drive their soldiers to fight to the death to defend a position or a military dictatorship could use it to drive a rival's forces to disarray. You could probably come up with a thousand scenarios yourself, Captain."

Yes, Steve could. All of them terrifying. Wrath is like the chemical equivalent of the guns he'd found on the Helicarrier, but--if there was another invasion, a ground invasion this time, yes, Steve could see a need. He didn't like it, but he could understand it. "What were you buying when you gave that to Fury?"

Sa Richardson doesn't pretend to misunderstand. "A favor. Tony thinks someone is messing around with the Avengers, particularly you, but he's not sure who, and he's not sure why, and he's not sure which parts of the evidence are real and which parts are his clinical paranoia talking."

"Do you think Tony suffers from clinical paranoia?"

"All the psychiatrists and therapists think so." Sa Richardson crosses his ankles. "Me? I think he's right. Someone is fucking your team around. Regardless, it's good to have more cards in your hand than you need to play down."

"Or bullets in your gun than you need to fire."

"Yes." Sa Richardson takes something from his pocket. It's a plain business card with no name, but with several phone numbers, an email address, a physical address, and a fax number. "In case you need assistance. I would take it as a kindness if you memorized them, Captain."

"Assistance on this issue?"

"On any issue. Jarvis can always reach me, but you may or may not have contact with Jarvis. These particular numbers and address remain constant and are routed to me wherever I might be."

"Did Tony set these up for you?"

"No. These I do myself." Sa Richardson takes out his cigarettes again, lights one for himself. He takes something else from the cigarette case and passes it over.

Steve finds it's a color photo of a murder victim. The man's been shot neatly in the chest and then several times in the groin. Steve's seen grisly deaths before, but it's still a shock to see color photos of them. "Did the person manipulating the Avengers do this? Who's the victim?"

"This is General Freddie Patterson." Sa Richardson takes a long drag on his cigarette and blows the sweet spicy smoke into the wintry air. A long lock of mink brown hair falls into his eyes, but he doesn't push it back. Steve smells nothing but calm from him, no fear, no worry. "He is the most recent person who hurt Tony."

Steve looks back down at the photo, swallows. "The most recent person."

Sa Richardson leans back, resting on his elbows as if he's at the park on a picnic. It's a casual pose, yes, but it also shows the hint of a gun under his suit coat. Steve is sure it's deliberate, and he's just as sure that Sa Richardson would not choose to use a gun on Steve. He'd have something else in mind, planned in advance to counteract or overcome or avoid any issues with the serum.

"The most recent person, yes, at least in this way," Sa Richardson says. "He was a lower ranking Army general. The military isn't too happy about Tony not designing weapons for them any longer, and they're even more angry that Stark Industries isn't building them. The accuracy and reliability of the competitors is a poor substitute for SI weaponry."

"They need to get over it."

"They do, yes." Sa Richardson takes another long drag. "But they haven't. Sending marriage candidates or fuck buddy candidates to talk Tony into bed, into changing his mind--it was quite an inter-agency thing for a while. This general tried to talk Tony around, but Tony wasn't having it. For whatever reason, the man lost patience or got orders. He slipped a dose of UnDone into Tony's glass of Scotch at a small private gathering."

Steve looks at the photo again, considers the groin shots. "He raped him."

"He didn't get a chance to rape him." Sa Richardson blows out a long tail of smoke. "The UnDone reacted badly with Tony's hormone-regulating medication. Honey picked him up from the hospital after they pumped his stomach."

The scent that the wind bring is fierce and cold. The warm summer day's earth scent shifts like a cloud has crossed the sky, not hinting of rain, but the deep roll of thunder, the silent pressure before a vicious tornado.

"You killed him." Steve hands the photo back.

Sa Richardson lights the corner of the photo with his lighter, and the paper blackens and crinkles and shudders to ash. "No. Or I should probably say, not this time. Someone else killed him. Patterson's been an ass for years, and his past caught up with him. He'd pulled this trick with someone else's daughter, and her father was not best pleased."

Steve nods, because that much had happened in his day. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Because *I* think someone's pushing buttons to do this to Tony again, but indirectly. Trying to get him married off to an inside source was something of a government agency hobby for a while. Tony thinks I'm wrong."

"You know about the Helicarrier, though."

"Yes, yes, I know about the Helicarrier," Sa Richardson says impatiently. "You misunderstand me. I'm not talking about someone arranging things to shove Tony into *your* bed. He's climbing into it on his own. You have to look at this strategically. If you flipped out and tipped into Fight and fucked Tony in the mess hall, you wouldn't automatically bond to him, because *he can't bond*. A sophisticated person, a sneaky person, an evil person would take one look at you and realize that expecting Tony to break up with you for being too nice isn't going to happen. They don't want to kill you. Or maybe they think they can't. So what do they do? They get you to scare the hell out of him."

"Oh." Steve's stomach gives a nasty little flip, and he swallows.

"Yes. Oh." Sa Richardson stares at the sky, jaw set.

"So why show me the picture of Patterson?"

"Because that kind of direct attack is what Tony's used to, and Tony's right in that someone else might be playing that kind of blunt force trauma to the head game. I don't know. All I know is that this *feels* like a double-cross to me. Tony doesn't agree. He thinks I'm paranoid."

"Are you?" Steve asks mildly.

"I have my own set of delicious mental health paperwork. And I am, at times, professionally paranoid. It pays to be in my line of work. But this time, no, I don't think I am. Of course, I would think that, if I was."

Steve works through the logic of all of that. "Thank you for telling me."

Sa Richardson waves his hand. "Tony said you would like to know."

"Is that why he sent you?"

Sa Richardson smiles. "As much as I would enjoy hauling you aside for the dreaded hurt him and I'll kill you talk, that's not what this is. Although of course, I hope it goes without saying that I would."

Steve smiles. There would be a line of people, not all of them human, who would gut him if he hurt Tony. Steve's pretty sure Jarvis, for one, would never let him see the light of day again.

"Tony deserves this vacation, but if their intention was to frighten him by goading you, staying with me for several days gives the impression that their plot worked. It may look to them like he's run away from you. But given what's happened, he wanted you to know more of the, mmm, possible factors in play."

"Did I?" Steve asks quietly. "Frighten him, I mean."

"You'll have to ask him."

Fair enough, but Tony has such a tendency for manipulation and also for sliding out of questions that Steve's sorry Sa Richardson won't say. It's honorable, it's right. But still. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Captain. It's why I'm here."

Steve takes it for what it is, an offer to give Steve as much information as possible. Sa Richardson answers all of Steve's questions about the various gifts that Tony arranged.

Favors and bribes. They're all large, all serious, all gifts designed for spies. The long string of numbers is a backdoor hack into an Asian government's secure intelligence database: good for seven minutes of untraceable searching. The six pack of pills is an antidote for a poison the Russians invented. The chemical formula makes a solvent so strong it can eat through steel in a few short seconds. The flash drive contains encryption software. When Steve asks whether Tony designed the program, Sa Richardson smiles. "No, Captain. Jarvis did."

They're strange gifts, and Steve doesn't understand them all. The hair is for a man that Sa Richardson claims is mad bad and dangerous to know, then he holds his finger to his lips. The vial of honey colored liquid is for something called ambrosia, and it's the only gift that Sa Richardson doesn't explain.

"One for each of the team," Steve says quietly.

"Yes. Plus an ace in the hole."

It's excellent strategy. Steve thinks Tony must be doing the same thing with other agencies, other powerful people. Finding backdoors, arranging escape hatches, designing retreats and attacks and sneaky ways out. No wonder Steve's hardly seen him since their talk after the Helicarrier.

"So," Steve says at last. "Do we know who's messing with the team? Or why?"

"No." Sa Richardson stubs out his cigarette on his shoe, and puts the butt in a small silver case he takes from his pocket. "There are several investigations under way, but they take time."

The wind whips through the little clearing. Chilly, wintry, reminding Steve of the ice. They just sit, companionably, for a while.

"I have a personal question," Steve offers at last, when the wind has scattered the little flecks of dried oak leaf all over them both.

"Certainly."

"Do you consider your marriage to Sa Delano permanent?"

Sa Richardson looks at him, sea gray eyes shifting to blue-green for a moment. "Why do you want to know?"

"I have my reasons," Steve says. "It's not idle curiosity, but if you would prefer not to say, I'll respect that."

"Our marriage was signed on a renewable longterm contract, not a permanent one." Sa Richardson looks back at the tree, scarred with age. "Terrence just completed his associate's degree, in August. In three weeks, he's going to You Dub."

At least, that's what it sounds like to Steve. "You Dub?"

"The U of W. The University of Washington. It's a large well-respected university in Washington state, and it's one of the few to offer on-site college educations to omega students. They started with a few traditional programs, like home economics and child care, then moved into nursing and childhood special education, then to a few fine arts, and then various sciences, and now the humanities."

"So, Terrence is going to school there?"

Sa Richardson sits up straighter. "Yes. He's majoring in English Literature. The Romantic poets, he thinks, or maybe early American lit. Hawthorne and Poe. Terr will get his full bachelor's and, when the time comes, pursue graduate studies. I'm proud of him."

"But that future wouldn't mesh with yours?"

Sa Richardson looks down at his hands, turns them over. Steve looks, too. They're not battered and scarred, like Tony's, but to his surprise, there are callouses. Different from Tony's. In fact, if Steve didn't know better, he'd say they looked more like the hands of the men he'd known in the trench divisions.

"It's not that our futures wouldn't mesh," Sa Richardson says carefully. "Terrence and I, we care about each other. We both had qualities we wanted in a partner, and--" He sighs, heavily.

Steve just waits. This is much more complicated than he'd expected, and he's really glad he asked. Dr. Katz is right. He needs this. Not the books, not the articles, but the mess of real lives. Steve's been trying to follow a checklist, do his homework, but real life isn't homework.

"Terrence's main desired quality in a partner was someone who would not just let him pursue his life, whatever that might turn out to be, but who *wanted* him to pursue it." Sa Richardson lays his pale hand flat on the dead grass. "Terrence is going to college, and he'll live in the married O dorms. It's one of the ways the college protects us--he's not bonded, but he'll have an easier time being taken seriously if they know he's married. He's not sucking up to profs because he wants a good hard heat fuck."

The words are so bitter, so unexpected, that Steve blinks.

"I'm sorry. That was rude of me." Sa Richardson waves a hand. "Old wound. Terrence, he'll be able to glory in the work he's doing and really spread his wings there. Make his own choices. To do that, I won't be his active husband, not like before. He'll be free to make his own decisions without worrying about how would it affect me." Sa Richardson strokes the dead grass, and his wedding ring shines in the wintry light. "Make his own colossal mistakes, too." He smiles, soft, happy.

"But you love him. Don't you?" Steve's trying to work his way through this. "Isn't that--you're letting him go. Unless I'm misunderstanding you."

"I love him," Sa Richardson agrees. "I loved him when I married him. We met through a service, but we courted. I'm letting him go because I love him."

That didn't really make sense to Steve. Sa Richardson could go with him, could still be married while Terrence went to college.

It must show on his face, because Sa Richardson says, almost fiercely, "Captain, I didn't go to college. I don't regret not going. But I want Terrence to have this chance. He isn't like me. Terrence has this warm, genuine, loving view of the world. His heart is open. I love that about him more than I think I can say, but he doesn't need me. He needs this. To go to college, to stay up too late at the local cafe talking about dead men's poetry, and if he's with someone back home, that'll constrain what he does, even if that someone loves him."

"I guess I don't really understand it," Steve admits. Doesn't Sa Richardson want to be there?

"Have you met Pepper?"

Steve's thrown. He knows Miss Potts runs Tony's company, but she lives in California. Steve's only met her a handful of times, mostly at Stark Industries fundraising parties for the reconstruction effort. She was terrifyingly efficient, and Steve was secretly a little afraid of her. "Yes."

"We talked to her about it. She went to college like a normal person. We talked to my sister, too. Then we sat down and decided, the two of us. Terrence gets to have my ring, not worry about all those alphas and betas thinking he's there to marry a degree instead of earn one, but he doesn't have to *be* married, because the only ones who decide that are the two of us."

"So you've decided not to be. Even though you still are. To game the system?"

Sa Richardson raises his eyebrows. "Yes."

"Is that--cheating?"

Sa Richardson's eyes don't crinkle when he really smiles. Instead they look predatory, like a pleased dangerous animal. "Why yes, I do believe it is. How shocking."

"What does Tony think about this?" Steve asks, because he's still trying to figure the nuances out.

Sa Richardson's smile goes smooth, flat. "For that, you'll have to ask Tony, Captain."

The 'Captain' is a slap, because Steve's been asking as himself. Steve ducks his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend."

"You didn't. But I don't speak for Tony. He speaks for himself. Is that why you wanted to know about my marriage? Because of Tony?"

To get honesty, Dr. Katz says, you have to give some. Steve takes a slow deep breath. "No. I asked for myself. I'm trying to understand relationships, and you're the only person I know who's specifically chosen a relationship where there's never going to be a chance of a bond. Everyone I ever knew is dead."

Sa Richardson's eyes flicker, but he's very hard to read. All Steve can tell from his scent is that it's some strong emotion. His earth scent is rich and lush, but the summer side of it, the sunlight, smells like a cloud passed over the sky. He searches Steve's eyes for a time, considering him.

Steve waits, not sure what to think.

"Captain, I have a personal question, or, should I say, I have a request."

"OK," Steve says, because that's fair.

"May I scent you? Up close?" Sa Richardson doesn't smell of arousal, but Steve thinks he's getting better at reading omega scents. He smells a little like curiosity. Or maybe Steve's just so used to smelling that emotion on Tony he's expecting it. Whatever the emotion is, it seems powerfully controlled, and Sa Richardson's scent is oddly muted, the fresh earth still warm, but fainter.

"Yes." It's a very personal request. In Steve's world, the request itself would have all kinds of meanings he's sure don't apply here. "I'll hold still. I give you my word."

"Thank you."

Sa Richardson doesn't approach from the side, the way Jolene had. He doesn't approach from beneath Steve's chin, the way Ezra had. Instead, frowning in concentration, Sa Richardson swings his leg over Steve's stretched out thighs so he can sit down in his lap. Up close, the omega smells strongly of cold winter, expensive cashmere, and Tony. There's another scent, too, that Steve knows must be Terrence.

His backbrain is too caught up in the rich earth scent of Sa Richardson himself, though. Before Steve can control his own stupid mouth, he says it. "You're a virgin."

Sa Richardson's nose is poised just inches from Steve's throat. He looks up through his dark lashes, not moving. "I'm really not. I spent the morning making love to your boyfriend, Captain."

"No, I know. I just--you are though. A virgin. I can smell it." Steve's backbrain just lets the words tumble right on out, burbling like a brook. "And I hate it. I hate it."

Sa Richardson's gaze turns stony. "I'm afraid that's not up to you, Captain."

"No. Captain. I hate that. Everyone here calls me that. Everyone but Tony. I hate it. I *hate it.* Nobody calls me by my name. I have a *name*."

"Ah. Forgive me." Sa Richardson's pale calloused hands come up and hold Steve's face in his icy fingers. "Steve. Hold very still."

Steve shuts his eyes tight. Maybe this would have been better if he'd said no, but it's also traitorously good. Steve's been ignoring the winter wind, but the icy ground has been sapping his warmth for a while now. Sa Richardson's chilled fingers are like little tendrils of the ice that's surrounded Steve for years. The scientists keep saying they melted it, but Steve doesn't believe it. Part of him's still down there, trapped.

But the weight in his lap is warm, and the omega reeks of summer and of Tony.

Sa Richardson's nose bumps right into Steve's throat, utterly unafraid, bold.

Steve tries to stifle the noises. He is holding still, but he's being nuzzled right *there*, where he's barely been touched in so long, nuzzled again and again, by a gorgeous warm lapful of unbonded virgin omega who smells like his mate's recent sex, and dammit, he's only human. His throat is growling for him, little acquisitive grumbles he hasn't made in seventy years.

The exquisite torture lasts for long seconds. Sa Richardson's breath is warm, too, and it's painful, like the tingles of returning sensation to his limbs when he'd woken up. But then he pulls back, all at once, dropping his hands, too.

Steve opens his eyes, gasping for breath. He's hard as a rock, and that's probably very rude. His cock is jammed up against his khakis, right on the edge of Sa Richardson's ass, but he wants to see Sa Richardson's face so he looks up instead of at Sa Richardson's throat.

Sa Richardson is looking at him, and his gaze is full of a shocked, deep, sympathetic sadness, like he sees something, knows something now. "Do they know?" His voice is low.

"Who?" Steve asks, swallowing. His throat feels scratchy. Maybe the growling.

"I don't know," Sa Richardson says, waving a hand like Tony does when he's upset. Almost flapping it. "Anyone!?"

"About what?" Would it be rude to ask him to do that again? Yes, yes, it probably would. But God, it had felt good. Just having him in his lap feels delightful.

"Steve." Sa Richardson actually gnaws his lip, and it's the first time Steve's seen him make such an obvious tell. "Steve, does *anyone* know? Does Tony know?"

"About what?" Steve asks absently. His hand creeps up and toys with the seam of the lovely cashmere coat. The way Sa Richardson's sitting, the coat is covering them both, and the warmth feels good.

"*Steve*." Sa Richardson leans forward, like he's upset, appalled even. That shouldn't happen. He's much too nice to have people go around appalling him. Steve hopes the little vacation with Tony will cheer him up. It would cheer up Steve, to have Tony languid in his bed for days at a time.

"Steve," Sa Richardson repeats, and Steve looks up.

"*Your entire bonded pack is dead*." Sa Richardson says. He sounds completely horrified.

Well, at least someone is. It's kind of comforting, in a way. Much better than the sort of polite but vague 'we're so sorry for your loss' noises that people have been making for a while now.

"Yes," Steve says. There's really nothing else to say.

"Steve. Oh, my God. Does anyone else know?"

Steve shrugs. Who would he tell? No one here even believes in letting omegas fight in combat. It would mean too much. Risk "pack behavior". Because that's bad. Steve's sure as hell not telling anyone now--they'd just be glad that Steve was free of it. Free of those bonds. Hell, they'd worry Steve was making more.

"Fury suspects. He was in on the ground floor of SHIELD, he worked with some of the war-years men. A lot of those packs acted pack-like, but they didn't fully bond. Given the changes in the world, I think most of the people now would just rather not know."

Sa Richardson is gnawing his lip again, nervous, worried, almost fretful. "It's--your scent. It's very distinctive. I thought, when I first smelled you, but I don't--I'm sorry. I don't know if--" He trails off, flustered.

Steve cocks his head. "You don't know if what?"

"I don't know if anyone else understands it," Sa Richardson says in a rush. "The breeze. Not the air, not the sunshine, but the *breeze*. They're your pack. You still smell like them. The breeze is the scent of their ghosts."

"Yes," Steve says, meeting Sa Richardson's eyes. "They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"Yes," Sa Richardson says fiercely. "They are."

Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay and thank you to everyone for all the lovely comments. I am hoping work will calm down Real Soon Now. Hopefully with the holidays, I'll at least get some good editing time in!

Tony's curled up with Alex, being petted. It's just the two of them now. Terrence has left to visit his best friend and won't be back until day after tomorrow. Alex came home from work a little late, looking tired and unusually worn.

He'd smiled when he'd found Tony curled up on the covers of his bed, waiting.

Alex hadn't wanted sex, but he'd kicked off his shoes and climbed up on the bed. Tony'd stretched out a little, then pounced, rolling Alex over and over until they were both laughing. That was better--Alex should always laugh like this.

After their tussle, they'd ended up with Alex sitting against the headboard, back propped up by his implausibly gorgeous silk pillows, and Tony's head in his lap like a pet.

For a long time, Alex had just run his hands over Tony's body, finding areas of tension and easing them with his clever fingers. Alex has always given the best massages--Tony's muscles get tight from his work with the hammer and the forge, from hanging upside down working on engines, from fighting, from the low sick aches that never entirely leave him these days.

Tony doesn't have to think when he's like this. He can just let time slide away, like the two of them are on a grassy bank in summer, watching the clouds pass across the sky. Sometimes, though, Tony does his best thinking when his mind is quiet.

"Alex," Tony says softly. They've been laying here for quite a while. An hour, maybe two.

"Mmm?" Alex's fingers don't stop working the tightness out of Tony's muscles. He sounds absent, fond, just as relaxed as Tony. This is good for both of them. Sometimes, years ago, they'd study like this. Alex with a book in one hand, his other hand buried in Tony's hair, stroking his shoulders. Tony, with his head on Alex's lap, dreamily reading a textbook propped against a rock or inventing in his head.

Tony rubs his chin against Alex's thigh, sighs softly into the soft cashmere suit fabric. "I miss you."

Alex's fingers stop their magic. Tony makes a little noise of protest and noses Alex's thigh again. *Don't stop.*

But Alex is pulling his hand back and peering down at him. "You miss me." He sounds puzzled. Which, ouch.

"I miss you," Tony repeats. He closes his eyes again, does his best to drift off, but the sweet river-like peace is slipping away.

"I--didn't realize," Alex says softly. "I thought you wanted some space."

Tony rolls over and it's so easy like this. He's so relaxed, and Alex is Alex. It's simple to reach out and grip Alex's wrist with his teeth, bite down, sharp and hard. Demanding.

Alex snorts, but it's fond. His other hand cups the back of Tony's head, caresses him. "Want to try that in words?"

Tony nuzzles the bite mark. His teeth have left indentations, little white rectangles in Alex's pale skin, surrounded by pink. It's nice, but it doesn't seem to be getting through. Tony reaches up just enough to bite the underside of Alex's chin, lick right there a few times, follow up with tiny nibbles and licks to Alex's jaw and mouth. Then Tony flops back down, head in Alex's lap.

Alex is staring down at him with an unreadable expression.

They both know the chin licking is strictly forbidden. Even the underground O community finds it upsettingly feral. Tony's well aware that it's the kind of extreme submissive display that's called perverse. Once or twice, Alex has let him get away with it when they're both in the heady flush of desperate passionate sex. Not often, but sometimes, Tony forgets to control himself when he's with Alex. Acts completely without thinking, acts with just his heart.

This is different. This is Tony being deliberate.

Alex's hands are trembling as they bury themselves in Tony's hair, stroking him again. "You *miss* me."

Tony just looks right back, sleepy, submissive, content now that Alex is touching him again. "Yes. I miss you."

"I thought you called me because you needed the assist."

"I know," Tony says. He reaches up his own hand to cup Alex's cheek.

"You've been avoiding me the past several months," Alex says. It's not angry, but it's certain, like Alex knows it for a fact.

"Yes."

"You're not even going to deny it?"

"What would be the point? It was deliberate." Tony keeps his hand on Alex's cheek. This is harder than he thought it would be, and he'd imagined it to be pretty fucking hard.

Alex looks away, and Tony can't blame him. "Because of Steve."

"No," Tony says as gently as he can. "Not Steve. Terrence. Wait--Alex baby, hear me out. I know I was--difficult about him at first, but I was wrong. He's been good for you. I like him." Tony's smile is wry. "I wanted you to have the chance to have him, if you wanted, without worrying about me. To go with him, to Washington."

"It doesn't work like that, Tony," Alex says, giving him a gentle poke in the shoulder. "I love Terrence and Terrence loves me, but he's going to college. Period."

"I'm sure you haven't noticed, Richardson, but I'm not the brightest crayon in the box when it comes to relationships."

Alex snorts. Which, thanks, babe.

Tony goes on, determined to get this out. "And there's another reason. I--probably should have told you earlier, but--" God, this is so hard. Stupidly, horribly hard. "Do you remember your sister's Christmas party?"

Alex goes still. Then, slowly and carefully, he pulls his hands from Tony's hair, looks away.

Yeah, this is going to be as goddamn awful as advertised.

"Do I remember when you showed up at 2 in the afternoon, wearing Rudolph antlers and reeking of Scotch, with four strippers, to my sister's house for roast turkey and eggnog? Do I remember my niece asking me how come your date was wearing sparkly gold panties and should she get the nice lady some pants? Gosh, Tony, no, that happy occasion slipped my mind." Alex snorts. "It's also slipped the mind of every single one of my family members, most of whom were underage."

Tony looks down at his hands. Yes, OK, he deserves every word. There's another long ugly pause, because Tony can tell that Alex isn't done.

"I remember," Alex says at last. "I just want to say--all I did was *ask* you. You said yes, Tony. When I asked, I wasn't trying to force you to do something you didn't want to do. You seemed excited when I asked if you wanted to come for Christmas dinner at Sarah's, and I thought you wanted to go. I wouldn't have--" Alex stops, takes another breath. "I asked, that's all, and if you'd said no, that would have been OK."

Tony looks at his hands, worn and battered, scarred from endless experiments. Times like this he has no idea why Alex put up with him over the years.

"You didn't have to show up and--make fun of me in front of my family," Alex says, looking away. The expression on his face is shut down. "Maybe I *should* have known that I wasn't supposed to invite you to my family Christmas party, but, once you made it clear, I did stop. I've been--better. I haven't asked you to go to anything like that since."

And Alex hasn't. Since then, Alex has avoided asking Tony to Richardson family functions, to Price functions, to parties and galas, to Alex's own events. When Alex invites him to

dinner, it's always kept strictly professional. If it's a date evening with Terrence, Alex keeps Tony in the house or condo, out of the public eye.

Sometimes, given their social circle, they run into each other at parties, but Alex keeps his hands to himself. He never starts a single thing in public. Tony has been known to, but Alex has been scrupulously polite.

Tony hates it more than anything in the world.

"You thought I didn't think we had a relationship," Tony says quietly. Their fight was awful. "You said, 'You never believe love between Os is worth anything.'"

He's answered by Alex's sudden scent of shame, tinged with anger and fear, but Alex doesn't say a word. He just looks away, still and silent. Hurt. Very hurt. Still.

"Do you remember what I said?" Tony asks, looking up at Alex's beautiful profile.

Alex slides Tony's head off his lap and gets off the bed. Tony lets him go. It's one of the hardest things Tony's ever done, but he is going to follow the advice he was given if it kills him. Let Alex say his piece.

"Yes," Alex says, hands shoved in his pockets, back straight. "You said, 'I know exactly how much O love is worth, gorgeous. Right down to the penny.'" *Sneering*. Lip curled.

It's exactly the way Tony'd said it that afternoon in Alex's sister's side room. The words sound so cruel that Tony flinches. Back then, Alex had gone white, ducked his head, and walked out.

They hadn't talked for a long time, and Tony suspects it's only by Terrence's intervention that he has Alex back at all.

"I'm sorry," Tony says. That's the first thing he has to do. Fucking suck it up and apologize.

Alex hunches in on himself, doesn't reply. He goes to the nightstand and fishes around for his cigarettes. Once he's got one lit, he says, "You meant it, Tony. Don't apologize for telling me the truth at last."

Yeah. This wasn't going to be easy. "I am sorry. I was talking about myself. How much I'm worth. Not you."

Alex drags on the smoke, eyes shut.

"I should have realized how it would sound," Tony says, trying to find the tone, the right words, that will take away that haze of shame surrounding his Alex.

Alex blows out his smoke and turns around. "No. If you want to re-open this fight, then we can, but you don't get to just tell me sorry and have me drop it."

Tony is sprawled on Alex's bed like a cat. Even now, he's not afraid of Alex. "I'm trying to tell you I was wrong."

Alex braces his hands on the dresser, hunched over like he needs the support to stay upright. He looks more than just tired, he looks worn out, worn down. "Tony. Do you ever think of what I've done? Not just the sex but what I've *become* for you? Fuck it, never mind."

"Tell me."

Alex takes another long drag, doesn't look up. "What good would it do? It's fine. Let's just drop this. I'll accept your apology. We can just move forward. This has been good, right? Like this?"

Tony sits up. This has been good. Staying with Alex and Terrence, relaxing, being himself, just letting go. He's tempted to tell Alex that, let the mess of that damn party fade into the past, but it wouldn't fade. It would fester. It's been festering for over a year.

"Alex?"

"Yeah?" Hesitant, uncertain.

"I don't think I've ever said thank you. For everything you did after. Back then."

From this angle, Tony can see Alex's eyes shadow in confusion, but all he says is, "Oh. Well. You know. My pleasure."

No, it hadn't been.

Tony thinks of his best friend, who'd wanted to take engineering classes on the West coast, who'd been so bored by playing the dating game that he'd nearly failed deportment until Tony helped him, who'd tried to get him into college, who'd made him a cake with exploding frosting for his birthday.

Thinks of Alex driving them that first time. A late model silver Camry, legit untraceable plates, legit fake ID for them both. How Alex had been calm the whole way through the plan, but how, twenty minutes from where they were dumping the car, Alex had pulled over.

The pale blur of Alex's face as he scrambles out before he's even shut off the engine, falls to his knees in the rain, drags himself up, barely makes it to the gutter before being sick.

How much *had* it cost Alex to learn how to kill people?

How much had it cost him to help Tony? To become what Tony needed?

A mess in the rain, while Tony sat in the car, still numb, not feeling anything.

"You dropped all your correspondence classes," Tony says. He hadn't put it together at the time. He'd been living in the basement, busy with his nervous breakdown. He's thought about it lately, though. Often.

"I did, yeah." Alex's shoulders are still tense and he's hunched in on himself. "It was fine. I mean, I could have retaken them."

Yeah, right. After all the strings pulled to get Alex into one of Cal Tech's classes? They weren't going to take an omega back after dropping because of 'emotional reasons'. Christ. Knowing Alex, he's probably been blaming himself for betraying the O Cause or some shit all these years.

"You couldn't have," Tony says. Usually, he's happy to let people believe their own lies, but maybe that's not such a hot idea in this case. "We both know it."

Alex shrugs, doesn't deny it. He has that look on his face, the one that says in two seconds he's going to pretend to have work. Tony can't really blame him--he's pulled that particular trick many many times.

"Alex," Tony says slowly. "Can you come sit on the bed with me for a second? I have something important to say."

Alex looks at him, wary, but he comes over. Yeah, pretending to have Important Work in ten nine eight seven-- "OK."

Or possibly that's just Alex's imminent panic face. "You're dying, aren't you?"

"What?! No!" Tony rolls his eyes. "Jesus Christ. You get a little sick one measly time and nobody ever let's you forget it."

Alex grabs his chin, holds him still, peers into his eyes. "You weren't a little sick, you were almost dead. Which I found out from the newspapers."

Tony hunches his shoulders, scowls. "Yes, yes, and I'm sorry about that, but it's ancient history now. I'm fine. Look. I have something I want to say, and I need your full attention."

Alex's focus sharpens. "You have it." He's wearing his hunting face. Whoops. That's not really what Tony had in mind, but it's going to have to do.

"I avoided you because I needed some time to think about what you'd said," Tony says. "I don't believe in your academic journals. Didn't. I was OK with us just agreeing to disagree about why were together. I mean, that worked for a while. But at the Christmas party I was-- " This part is the hardest. "I was jealous."

"You were jealous," Alex repeats, surprised. "Of Terrence?"

Tony looks at his own beat up hands. "I like him. He's been really good for you--I can tell. He's been a lot better to you than I ever was." That's pretty fucking mortifying--outclassed in love by some young kid a matchmaker picked. Fucking ouch. "But logically, if what we had was just sex, if it was just that you're the only person I can trust to really take me under, then what you do with him, it shouldn't matter to me. If fucking Os is just, you know, a way to unwind and relax, then what the hell am I doing being a catty bitch?"

Alex raises his eyebrow.

Tony twists his fingers together, considers the oriental carpet. "It's possible I flipped out about your family Christmas party because you wanted us both to go as your dates. I mean,

theoretically."

Alex flops back on the bed and drags a pillow over his face.

"Yeah. I know. Kind of rich, right, considering that I've fucked--well, I'm not sure how many people besides you."

Alex makes a grumpy noise from under the pillow, then thwaps Tony with it.

"I know." Tony sighs. "So, look, I thought maybe I'd better get my head on straight. Plus, I wanted to try dating Steve. I kept thinking that I should try being on my own."

Alex is staring at the ceiling, a cerulean-blue silk pillow clutched against his chest.

"Look, I'm not good at this. I'm sorry. I try, but I'm not." Tony reaches over and brushes at Alex's hair. "I miss you. I know you're going to be busy getting Terr out to school for the next couple weeks. I know that, and you don't need to worry about me and all the, you know, research stuff. The stuff I have you working on. We're figuring it out. You just enjoy Terr for a bit."

Alex turns his head, looks into Tony's eyes, frowns, obviously thinking hard.

"But," Tony says, heaving in a deep breath. His hands are shaking, which is stupid. This is Alex for god's sake. "I'd like you to think about visiting Manhattan more. Um. And if you do, I'd like, if you could--"

Jesus Christ, this relationship shit is fucking horrible. Alex is just waiting, and Tony realizes that Alex must not know what he's going to ask. Sometimes, Alex will just fill in the words and save his ass, but not this time. Tony steels his nerves. "When you come to New York, I'd like it if you stayed at Stark House. With me."

Alex blinks slowly. "With you. At Stark House."

"Yeah," Tony says, and it comes out kind of a croak.

"Other people, your team, would know I was there, with you?" Alex asks.

"Yeah." Tony scoots a little closer. "I know you might be kind of worried about their bizarre habit of obeying the law and shit, but nobody's given Honey any trouble."

"I'm a little more hardcore than Honey." Alex is gnawing at his lip, and it already looks chapped. That's pretty unusual for Alex. He's usually careful about looking perfectly groomed and unruffled, regardless of the circumstances.

Tony sits himself up on his elbow. "Is this about Steve? You didn't say how it went today."

Alex turns on his side, too, but he pokes at the coverlet, bangs hiding his expression. "I liked him."

Tony scoots closer. "Why is that a problem?"

Alex shoots him a look. "I didn't say it was a *problem*. He's a good strategic thinker, very honorable. A lot oomphier than he looks in his PR photos."

"Oomphier," Tony says, amused.

"More dominant. More alpha." Alex shrugs. "You know what I mean."

"I do, yes." Tony props his chin in his hand. "What's the problem, then?"

"He seems under the delusion that I'm a nice person," Alex says grumpily, glaring at Tony, as if it's Tony's personal fault.

"You are a nice person. I haven't actually tried to sing your praises to Steve. He must have sussed out your gooey sweet heart all on his lonesome." Which isn't that surprising, now Tony thinks about it. Steve's pretty perceptive. He just hides it under the aw shucks charm.

"Darling, there are thousands of people who will tell you I don't have a heart. I'm a stone cold killer."

"Bet he's killed more people than you have." Tony rolls Alex onto his back so he can lay on top of him and be comfy. "Is this because he finds you attractive?"

"Darling, you can't just say things like that." Alex's arms come up automatically to hold him, though, which is a good sign.

Tony nuzzles into Alex's chin, gives it another lick, bratty as hell. "Did you think I wouldn't be able to smell him all over you?"

"It's--I didn't--" Alex huffs out a breath. "It wasn't like that, and I wish I could explain, but I really can't."

Tony gives him an amused look. "You mean you *didn't* blow him in an alley?"

"*Tony*!"

"Well, there goes that hot fantasy. I mean, sure, the knees of your suit had grass and mud on them, but it was just too good to be true. "

"I thought I got all the grass off," Alex mutters--and oh my God, this is too good. His cheeks are turning pink. Alex is *blushing*.

Tony just rubs his face against Alex's neck and cheeks and chin, enjoying the scent of Steve that lingers faintly there. "I kind of like it."

Alex slides his hands into Tony's hair, petting him. Even better. Maybe if Tony plays his cards right, he can still get Alex to agree.

"He's a good man," Alex says. "He deserves better than the world has thrown at him."

It's surprisingly blunt for Alex, who usually avoids words like 'good' in favor of complicated social analyses of roles and influences in personal choices. "So you liked him."

"I liked him." Alex strokes Tony's hair absently, ghosts his thumb over the back of Tony's neck. "Darling, I'll stay at Stark House with you, but I don't want to do anything that will make him uncomfortable."

Tony raises his head in surprise. The glorious relaxation he always feels under Alex's hands gives him the guts to be more honest than he would otherwise. "You think he'd feel excluded if you slept in my bed?"

Alex searches Tony's eyes. "I think Steve takes people's words very seriously. I don't want to hurt him, that's all."

That's so surprising that Tony sits up on Alex's lap, shaking off Alex's touch on his neck. "You're not usually so considerate of people who aren't me or your family. I mean, you are, in a general way, but you're usually--"

"I do whatever's best for you and damn the consequences," Alex says. "Yes. This time, I think Steve deserves some care, that's all."

Tony toys with Alex's collared bespoke shirt. "You liked him."

Alex's jaw works again, like Tony's pushing him too far. "I admitted that already."

"So," Tony takes a deep breath and toys with Alex's shirt some more. He badly wants to move straight to relaxing Alex as much as possible before Alex has to start the college shopping. Terrence is so excited. Tony knows that Alex is, too, but it's bittersweet. Alex is going to buy every last thing he couldn't buy for himself--or Tony.

"So?" Alex repeats, giving him a curious look. "Spit it out, darling."

"Did you know that Steve lead a full commando team, in the war?" Alex's expression shifts, and Tony suddenly can't read it.

"Yes, I did know." Alex plays with Tony's hair, but in a distracted way.

It makes sense, really. Alex has always been scrupulous about background checks. He'd have checked Steve's paper trail as far back as it went. Hell, Steve's probably lucky that Alex didn't pry his mouth open to check his teeth like a horse at auction.

"I want you to think about, well, him," Tony says, looking at Alex warily. "In that way. See if you wouldn't....make an exception. Steve deserves care, but you deserve care, too. I'm not making any demands. I just want you think about it."

Alex's attention focuses back in on him, then he looks down and away, nods once. "All right."

Just like that?

What a very strange response. Yes, Alex has always said he would be willing to take up with anyone Tony settled down with, but this is different. Especially after the shit Tony pulled in the early days of Alex's marriage to Terrence, Tony expects some kind of conditions. Questions. Something.

"Alex?" Tony asks gently.

Alex's shoulders square a little bit. The exact posture they'd been taught to use to show willingness to do a difficult task. The look in Alex's eyes is uncertain, though, and very hesitant. "I said 'all right.' I'll do it. Let me know what days you'd like me at Stark House. I'll be back from Washington state on the 17th. I would like to speak with him first, before I come, so there's no misunderstandings."

This is a lot more than Tony hoped for, but there is also something not quite right about Alex's answers. But Tony's gut instinct on this is strong. As strong as it was about Barton.

Install Barton in Stark House and keep him there. *No matter what.*

Tony doesn't know who this instinct is for, just as he didn't know why he had to haul Barton home and stick him in a spare bedroom, but as sure as anything, Alex needs to stay in Tony's house, in Tony's bed, not just once or twice, but often. *No matter what.*

"Three days a week, at least," Tony says. "And you're staying with me in my real bedroom."

Alex gives him that unreadable look again for a long time. Focused, intent, serious. Then, slowly and deliberately, Alex leans up and nips the bottom of Tony's chin, licks it, leans back, throat bared.

Jesus, Alex.

At first, all Tony can do is gape, then he plasters himself on top of him, kissing Alex for all he's worth.

*

When Natasha's quiet footfalls enter the living room, Steve puts down his drawing materials.

Something is very wrong.

"Were you not able to get Barton and Coulson off the Bogota job?"

Natasha sits down on the coffee table. Her body posture is stiff, angular, like it had been in the days after the invasion. She still hasn't met his eyes.

When her gaze lifts at last, Steve can't read her expression. "Why did you send me to SHIELD to pull our people off the Bogota job?" she asks.

Steve doesn't lie to the team. "I talked to Tony. He asked me to. He said I should pull our people out, but when I asked him whether the job should be cancelled, he left it up to me. I'm sorry if I got you into any trouble by sending you there to try to stop the job entirely."

Natasha looks at the floor between them, straightens her shoulders a little. "I had Barton and Coulson sent to Alaska to track down a lead on a shipment of parts to build a dirty bomb, but I wasn't able to get the Bogota job cancelled entirely."

Steve's looking at the stiffness, the tension. "What happened?"

"The thirteen SHIELD agents sent in to track the Revolutionists were attacked by what is believed to be a series of drone strikes. Injuries were heavy, and there were five casualties. Others are still in critical condition." Natasha meets his eyes. "What did Stark tell you?"

"He told me to tell them no about the job, but there was something about his voice. I pressed him."

"Yes," she says. "You think he knew it was a plant. A setup?"

"He told me I should decide myself about trying to get the whole job cancelled. He said-" Steve bit his own lip. "He told me to ask Jarvis about a bedtime story, but we'd been joking about something else. At the time, I thought it was maybe some additional personal information. But it wasn't."

"That would be like him." She is staring at her hands. "Hiding what he was telling you, in case it was overheard. What was it?"

"He sent me to ask Jarvis about a copy of *Just So Stories* that was kept in his study. As a bedtime story."

Her head jerks up, surprised. "Rudyard Kipling."

"Yes," Steve says slowly. "Jarvis sent me to one of Tony's private workshops. A file there. Tony had written out some intel that he'd received."

In fact, Steve had found all Tony's precautions rather odd at first. The original intel had been on a flash drive, which Tony'd apparently destroyed, along with anything that had touched it. Tony'd transcribed the intel, by hand, with a pencil on graph paper, and he'd asked Steve to put the paper in the forge when he was done reading it.

Then Steve had read the intel--and promptly stuck it in the forge just as requested.

"From Sa Richardson," Natasha says, looking intently at him.

"Yes. Because of what Ross said the other day, Tony believed there someone was messing with the team. Someone high up. So, Tony sent in his mongoose to look for a cobra--his words. The intel came from a dead drop. Sa Richardson doesn't know who the mole is and Tony doesn't either, but Sa Richardson asked verifiable questions, things only a real SHIELD insider would know, and asked about the cobra."

"And they warned him about Bogota."

"Yes. It was a maybe, the mole said. A heavy hunch, not a sure thing. The mole is off the radar, unreachable, and Sa Richardson told Tony that was the agreement. It's hard to turn

SHIELD people, and he thought it was better to buy a single set of questions than let the chance slip by."

"And that's all they would say?" Natasha asks. "That Bogota was maybe arranged?"

"No." Steve meets her eyes. "The mole said there is a cobra. They're not sure where. Possibly in SHIELD."

Natasha's hands tighten together.

"But, if so, not just SHIELD," Steve says. "The mole thinks the cobra's nest is in the World Security Council."

Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

> I am so sorry this chapter has been so delayed. I had unexpectedly busy holidays, and then I came down with the Plague. *warily peers out of blankies* *sniffles mournfully* I think I am on the mend at last.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve's sitting in a conference room at SHIELD with Clint. In the last day and a half, SHIELD has sent six separate assault teams after various leads concerning the mess in Bogota. Steve and Clint have been charged with reviewing the teams' footage to see if they can pick up any details the agents on the ground missed.

They've been at it for hours, but Steve doesn't mind. It's good to have an objective that makes sense right now.

Besides, if he's stuck here another couple hours, he'll be able to avoid the therapy appointment Sa Richardson made for him. Not that Steve isn't grateful.

He is.

But Steve doesn't want to go to therapy about it.

Yesterday, Sa Richardson's warm weight in his lap, fingers curled on Steve's shoulders like he was holding Steve to the world by brute force, Steve had felt just a little better. It had been such a relief to talk to someone, especially someone like Sa Richardson, and it had helped.

Sa Richardson had asked him to talk about his pack--who they were, what they were like, stories of their time together.

So, haltingly, Steve had.

Partway through the first story, Steve's hand had curled around Sa Richardson's back, and he'd tucked the omega against his chest without thinking about it, needing the contact and the warmth and the way Sa Richardson's throat rumbled faintly with growls when he was worried or displeased (he had especially disliked Steve's story about being lost in the woods with wounded along, and he also growled every time Steve mentioned Howard's name).

Steve had eked out a few words about the Commandos he'd loved, comforted by Sa Richardson's weight. During one of the painful pauses, Sa Richardson shifted and tucked his nose right into the neck of Steve's shirt, breathing against Steve's skin.

In Steve's old world, that would have been more than a bold pass. It would have gotten Sa Richardson tossed to the ground and fucked senseless, claimed and owned, but for some reason, despite the arousal, Steve didn't even feel the urge.

Maybe it was the trusting way he'd just curled in, unafraid, but Steve could picture Sa Richardson curled up with other omegas just like this. Wanting comfort during a sad story, and so nosing in to catch as much of their friend's scent as possible, like a kitten climbing under a sweater out of the cold, uncaring if their tiny claws prick the skin, sure of their welcome.

But that was the problem, really.

Holding the omega in his lap, murmuring the stories into his hair--that had felt *right*. Steve felt comforted, but he also still felt, well, like a man. It was OK to talk to your omega about this kind of thing. It was OK to share with them.

But of course, Sa Richardson doesn't belong to him, and Steve is now stuck in the modern world where he's supposed to talk to a therapist instead.

Steve props his chin on his fist and watches the street scene of Port Au Prince on a monitor. People, people, people. Nothing interesting about any of them, unless you count pickpockets or someone stealing a handful of grapes from a fruit vendor. He wishes the footage was more distracting.

"Thinking about our Tony?" Clint asks, still watching the same scene. He's got a pad of paper in front of him and every now and again, he makes a tick mark. Some kind of mnemonic, maybe, or a bet with Natasha.

"No," Steve says. He sounds gloomy and he doesn't mean to. Damn.

"Wanna talk about it?"

That's the nice thing about Clint. He's blunt, he's deadly, and he's got a good ear. If you want to talk, he can listen with utter stillness for hours. "You'd make a good shrink."

"I'd make a fucking terrible shrink," Clint says, horrified. "People would jump out of windows to skip their sessions with me, man."

"Uh huh." Steve presses pause, double-checks, but no, that's a normal cell phone. Not a radio transmitter. "You're a good listener, though."

"Thanks. I guess. But seriously--all insults aside, you want to talk about it?"

Steve doesn't, particularly. He'd enjoyed talking with Sa Richardson--had felt, for the first time since the stupid ice, a little comforted for the loss of his pack.

And apparently feeling comforted and cared for made Steve into a blithering idiot.

"Have you ever agreed to do something just to make someone stop nagging you?" Steve asks.

"All the fuckin' time, man." Clint pushes play on the screen. Watches, hits pause again, sighs, hits play. "What, you think Nat's never made me a see a doctor when I didn't want to?"

"Fair point." Clint's hatred of medical is legendary. "But you go to make her happy, right?"

"Well, yeah, and because if she gets really pissed she'll just clock me and dump my ass in the med bay when I'm out cold. It's bad for my rep."

Steve laughs. "At least I don't have to worry about that."

"If it's Tony we're talking about, I really wouldn't count on that," Clint says. "Jesus, this street scene is fucking boring. There's still no usable intel out of any of it."

"Maybe the one in Estonia will be more interesting."

"It'll just have more of those fuzzy winter boots." Clint sighs. "Look, if it's not Tony nagging you with wifely mutterings, who is it?"

Steve eyes Clint warily. Glances up at the ceiling.

"No, man, this room is clean. Coulson said."

Steve props his chin on his fist again. "You know Tony's friend from the other day?"

Clint shoots him a look of horror. "No fucking way."

"What?" Steve's not expecting that answer. Clint must be thinking of a different friend.

"Jesus Christ, Cap." Clint looks him up and down, shakes his head. "You sure do like them feisty."

"I don't think feisty is the word," Steve says, frowning. One of the French resistance fighters had been a bit feisty. She'd get into shouting matches over who could shoot better and then everyone'd would troop off to set up old wine bottles on tree stumps for an impromptu sharp-shooting contest.

There'd been more shouting and plenty of shooting of defenseless bottles, and it had all ended with whoops of laughter and a good deal of kissing.

"Only because stone cold killer is impolite," Clint mutters.

Steve frowns. "He's not--"

"Trust me, he is." Clint hits the pause button. "I ought to know."

"You don't like him?"

"I didn't say that." Clint gives Steve his full attention. "I met him once, you know. In Prague."

"What happened?" Steve fervently hopes Sa Richardson wasn't the object of a job.

Clint's mouth tips up in a smile. "He tried to hire me."

"Clint," Steve says firmly.

"Yeah, yeah." Clint sits back, props his boots on the table. "I was with Tasha on a job. During our downtime, we used to go to this bar. Sort of a pro bar, you know?"

"For prostitutes?"

"For killers and thugs, man. Benny's Bar was kind of neutral territory. Everybody likes to let their hair down sometimes. Anyway, Richardson was having a quiet drink there. Said he was in town for some kind of engineering conference, giving a talk about waste drains. I thought it was, you know, code speak."

Yes, Steve would have thought so, too.

"That was legit, though. Guy likes pipes. Kind of a hobby." Clint shrugs, like civil engineering is weirder than breeding fluffy little dogs. Steve almost has to agree. He sees the point in building things like Tony does, but sewer pipes? No.

"But he bought me a drink, said he'd like to offer me a position at Trixthonos." Clint looks almost wistful. "Amazing salary, retirement bennies, gold standard health care, company car, and full dental."

"Trixthonos is his company?"

"Oh yeah." Clint comes back from his wayward thoughts. "Pepper used to run it, actually, back when they started. They mostly move illegal repro drugs, you know."

"No, I don't know. Repro drugs?" Pepper ran it? Pepper Potts--that sweet faced woman--ran an illegal drug company?

"Reproductive drugs. Fuck You was their big starter, but they've branched out. Oops is their abortion drug. That one's legal in some countries--Canada, France, the UK. Not here, though. Their other big seller is a heat suppressor. That's the one he wanted me for."

"But you're a beta," Steve says, confused.

Clint laughs. "No, man. He didn't want me to try the stuff. He was looking for protection for his employees. A lot of people get really fucking unhappy if their omegas don't go into heat. *Really* unhappy."

Steve swallows. Yes, he can imagine. "So, Sa Richardson wanted you to protect the shipments?"

"Naw. His dealers. It's kind of an interesting strategy, actually. See, Alex said that when you first issue a drug, it scares people more. The first days are when people still think you can get the genie back in the bottle. If you hit the dealers, or make some examples of people who take the drug, maybe you can drive it off the island. Once there are people selling a drug on nearly every street corner, its existence is a done deal."

"Makes a certain sense," Steve says, impressed despite himself.

"So, in the early days, it's most dangerous for the new dealers. They're all alone out there. Vulnerable. Easy to pick off. Later, the dealers will have herd immunity because there's so many of them."

"He wanted you to protect some of these first-day dealers?"

"Yup. Tricky areas, too."

"The Middle East?" Steve guesses.

"The bible belt," Clint says, eyes twinkling. "And work some of the clinics, too. But Phil wouldn't go for it."

"Because it's illegal?"

Clint looks surprised. "No. I mean, yeah it is, but Phil just thought we owed SHIELD more time. He wanted to do the Avengers thing."

"I'm glad."

"Yeah, well, me too. Company car would still be nice, though." Clint points his boot at Steve. "So, what's Richardson nagging you to do?"

Steve grimaces. "See someone."

"Like, a doctor." Clint nods. "You're thinking of skipping out?"

Steve pushes play on the remote. "We're pretty busy, here."

"I dunno man. How pushy was he?"

Sa Richardson had snatched Steve's phone and dialed up Dr Katz himself. He'd refused to leave Steve's lap until he'd gotten an appointment confirmed.

"Well, kind of pushy," Steve says. "I think maybe he was just being polite. Because I'm a friend of Tony's."

Clint watches the street scene for a bit. "He's the first person you've wanted to be friends with outside of the team. I can see how you'd be afraid he's taking an interest just because of Tony, but he didn't strike me as that kind of guy."

"That's not what I'm afraid of," Steve says, but he stops himself. "I don't know. He's out of my league."

"Phil was out of my league. Still is." Clint pushes the pause button. "You're Captain fucking America."

Steve winces. He doesn't want to date as Captain America. That's the whole problem.

Maybe that shows on his face, because Clint says, "Look. You liked the guy, right?"

Steve crosses his arms and glares at the monitor. "Yes." Pointlessly, but yes. "I'm not even sure if he likes alphas."

"Dude--no. You are making this way, way too complicated." Clint drops his boots off the desk and leans forward. "Do you say to yourself, What strategy will win us the entire Western front--or do you say, What's our next move?"

Steve rolls his eyes. "That's the wrong war, Barton."

"Whatever. My point remains. All you have to do is decide if you want to hurt his feelings or not."

"Of course I don't want to hurt his feelings. What are you even talking about?"

"Then go to the damn appointment. I don't know why, but Tasha always says that when people do weird shit like make doctor's appointments or make you get CT scans for minor concussions and we bug off and avoid it, then feelings get hurt."

"I really don't think Sa Richardson's feelings would be *hurt*."

"I didn't think Tasha's would be," Clint says, pointing a finger at Steve and then clicking it like a gun going bang. "Then wham, I'm hanging up by my ankles from some net trap she's set, and she's dragging my ass to the EMTs, bitching at me in Russian the whole entire way."

"That sounds more angry than hurt."

Clint shrugs. "Not all women show hurt the same way. Not that Richardson is a woman. But he's an omega. Same sort of thing--well, no, different, but you know what I mean. He's like, a caring type, right, under all those sharp pointy teeth?"

For all that it's phrased as rudely as humanly possible, Steve knows exactly what Clint means. "I think so. Yes."

"Then he's gonna be hurt if you skip your appointment. Bet on it."

*

Steve thinks of Clint's advice while he's waiting in Dr Katz's office. He doesn't have to enjoy the appointment, he doesn't have to get anything out of it, he just has to show up and do willing.

By the time the receptionist ushers him into Dr Katz's office, Steve is feeling more depressed than ever. He likes Dr Katz, and she's helped him a lot. There isn't anything she can do about the loss of his pack, though, and Steve doesn't want to talk about it. Not with her.

There will be discussions of clinical this and 'studies show' that, when to Steve, the Commandos were people. His people.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Dr Katz booms. Her voice is permanently tuned to loud New Yorker, but today it's not comforting. "My receptionist says you're here about an additional issue. What's going on for you?"

Steve sits in his usual chair, leans forward, elbows on his knees. He has no idea where to begin.

Dr Katz lets him stew a little while, then says, "Is this something that happened recently?"

"No." Steve feels like the worst kind of coward. God, he has to just get this over with. "It's stupid, OK? And the military doesn't even like talking about it. They aren't going to want it to get out. Hell, I don't even know why I'm here."

"Why are you here?"

He buries his face in his hands, scrubbing them through his hair. "I promised a friend that I'd come talk about it."

Dr Katz is quiet for a time. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Steve sits back, sighs. He's not a welsher, and he promised. "Let's just get this over with. I'll tell you, you can do whatever you have to do, probably tell my command, and we can both be done with it."

Dr Katz nods slowly. "All right, Captain."

"You know I led the Commandos, back in the war."

She nods again, purses her lips.

"Everybody these days likes to pretend all the packs back then were--pretend. Or temporary. That when people got assigned into small groups like us, they didn't make real packs. They didn't bond."

Dr Katz sits back, taps her pen on the tablet of paper. "Some of the packs were very real."

Steve snorts. "Tell that to the generals today." God, he sounds so bitter.

"Was your pack real, Captain?"

Steve gets up, paces to the window. All you can see is brown brick and alley, but it's clean. The dumpsters are well-tended. It looks nothing like the old days. "Do you know what happened to them?"

"That's above my security clearance."

"Of course it is." God forbid his own therapist be able to read his file. Steve glares down at the street below. "After the war, the surviving Commandos moved back to the states. They settled down in Ames, Iowa."

"Together?"

There's no censure in her voice, but Steve feels it anyway. "Together. We had several omegas. The guys bought a couple houses, right next door to each other. New development, GI funds. A couple of them went to school on the GI bill, got degrees, but most of the guys just got work."

"And the omegas?"

Steve taps his fist on the windowsill a couple times, gently, thinking about the names he'd seen on the obits. Jolene's obituary from the Ames Tribune. Survived by her many friends and family, including five beloved children. Stephen Grant Rogers Hoffman, eldest son. "They had the kids."

"I see," Dr Katz says. "Are any of your old pack still living, Captain?"

There's a pigeon sitting on an air conditioner across the way. Its wings are so dark green they look almost black. "No."

"Do you know whether their descendants are still a pack?"

Steve turns around quickly. "What?"

Dr Katz looks surprised. "Well, that's the function of a family pack. Just because the founding members pass away doesn't mean the pack itself perishes. You'll have lost your bond, of course, because of the time lag, but if the family is still a pack unit--"

"The military hates packs," Steve says, staring at her.

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. That doesn't mean packs don't exist. Plenty of smaller communities still have packs, and some sub-cultures in America are very pack oriented. Some religions encourage pack based bonds, too, of course."

Steve shakes his head. "I don't--did you know that I'd lost them?"

"No, Captain," Dr Katz says. Her voice is quiet for the first time since he's met her. "I'm very sorry to hear that you lost them. I'd been under the impression that your command had a temporary pack bond, the kind that naturally dissolved when the members went their separate ways."

Steve paces back to the window. "I smell like them."

"Your pack?"

Steve draws a few sketches on the clear pane of glass. "Yeah. They're all dead. But we were bonded. Real. And I-- lost them all."

"Oh Captain, I am so very very sorry." Dr Katz does sound it.

"It doesn't matter," Steve says. God, he has to get over this. "It doesn't change anything."

"Of course it matters. Of course it changes things."

Steve turns away from the window and rests his hip against the sill. "What does it change? I still have to get up every day and fight whatever needs fighting. I still have to go on."

"There are certain patterns to death. In the natural course of life, it's normal for a pack to lose an older member. You would expect, over time, to lose a member of your pack occasionally. It would hurt, very much, but also over time, you would gain new members. Children born into your pack family, or perhaps a new member married to an existing member."

Steve shrugs. True, but irrelevant. "The ice wasn't exactly natural."

"No, it wasn't. Your pack lost its bonded leader. I'm sure your loss was very painful to them. They'll have grieved for a long time. The fact that they settled down together after the war, had children, is a testament to how well you all bonded. Happily. Even after your passing, they stayed together."

Steve stares at the floor. Maybe. He'd like to think so.

"For them, your loss was more natural. It's tragic when a pack loses its bonded alpha, but bonded alphas take chances with their lives. They protect their family. Sometimes it costs them their lives."

"Cost of being the leader."

"Yes, you would see it that way," Dr Katz says. "But it's rare for a leader in his prime to lose his whole pack in one go. It goes against the order of things. All children slowly prepare to lose their parents--it hurts, yes, but that's how it works. Very few parents are doomed to lose their children or grandchildren."

"Doesn't change that it happened."

"No, it doesn't." Dr Katz sits back. "I don't plan to share this information with your command unless you ask me to, but I would like to talk about how losing your pack bond is affecting you."

"That's why I'm here," Steve says wearily.

"No, you're here because you're fulfilling a promise to a friend."

That makes Steve smile and duck his head. "Yeah."

"I'm glad your friend asked you to talk to me about this. I think this is going to make things easier."

Easier? How in the world will this be easier? "I thought you just got done saying this was a hard thing."

"It *is* a hard thing. But we've been trying to work on your Fight instincts kicking up. Up until now, we've been assuming that it's because of you're a fish-out-of-water in the new

world combined with your specific sexual interest in a new partner. An alpha who has lost his entire bonded pack is a different problem altogether."

"Please tell me there won't be more medical tests. I'm sick of medical tests."

Dr Katz's eyes twinkle. "The serum does mean you get more than your fair share."

Steve throws himself into one of her sturdy oak chairs with a sigh. "Can't we just assume I'm depressed as always and that the serum will take care of any problems my body has?"

"It's not quite that simple, I'm afraid." Dr Katz takes her pad of paper and begins writing down a few things. "The loss of your old bonded pack--frankly, I'm surprised you haven't gone into Fight a lot more often."

Oh great. Just what Steve wanted to hear. "I've been doing my exercises."

"Yes, well." Dr Katz finishes scribbling something down on her notepad. "I'm going to give you several more. I'm also sending you to see an old colleague of mine. We need to find out your alphaistic type."

"Why?" Steve doesn't care about his alphaistic type.

"Because different types of alphas lead packs in different ways. They also cope with loss differently. Here's my chief concern. You have, in the few months I've been working with you, suffered more trauma and experienced more risk factors than anyone who hasn't been declared legally dead."

Steve snorts a laugh.

"Alphas, especially extremely strong one, are naturally prone to depression. Sometimes that depression gets directed inward. Suicide is pretty common. If you didn't have the serum, I'd have you on some supportive medication. We can't do that. Sometimes, the depression gets directed outward--in Fight."

Steve grimaces. Yeah, he heard that part the first time. "You think it's going to get worse. Can't we just fix it?"

"I don't know whether it's going to get worse or not. You've had more incidents, but you've also been exposed to some severe triggers." Dr Katz rips the paper off her pad, folds it and hands it over. "As for fixing it. Well."

"I can do more exercises," Steve says. They've been helping. It's hard to find time, and he's now swamped with even more work, but at least it's something to do.

"We'll decide on some more exercises, yes. But there is a traditional method to help pack leaders through this kind of loss. It's well supported in the literature."

"Oh?"

"Touch. Alphas, particularly strong ones, always have higher touch needs than most other types."

Steve thinks of the warm weight of Sa Richardson in his lap. He turns Dr Katz's piece of paper over and over in his hand. "Just touch? Any kind?"

"Dr Santos will be able to tell you more about your type's needs. Some alphas, it doesn't matter. Twice-weekly therapeutic massages can help the E-2s as effectively as anti-depressants."

"But you think I need more than that."

"I think so, yes." Her eyes behind her glasses look like a frog's. Large and sort of buggy shaped. But kind. "Regular and prolonged affectionate or sexual touch from loved ones."

"Tony's not ready for that." Steve meets her eyes. "I'm not sure--I'm not sure he'll ever really be ready for casual touching. Not like--not like some people would be." The more pictures Steve sees of Tony with other omegas, the more clear it's become how tense Tony is the rest of the time.

"That's OK, Captain. You're a smart man, you'll figure something out. I would encourage you to think more broadly about this--even if Dr Santos recommends a sexual relationship for your type, that doesn't mean you have to follow her advice to the letter. Remember how we start small in the exercises?"

"I'm not sure there's an equivalent to starting small when it comes to touch."

"Sure there is. Handshakes. Hugs. Sitting next to someone on the couch. Putting your feet on someone's lap. You don't have to hit zero to sixty in one day."

Steve thinks how comforting it is to sit in the living room, reading aloud, while Tony works on electronics in his chair. Yes, Tony's got a good ten feet of space between them, but Steve still feels close when they do that. "OK."

"Good." Dr Katz clears her throat. "You might also ask your partner to think of some ideas, too. Not in a pressuring sort of way, but in a brainstorming sort of way."

Steve has a worrying vision of what Tony might come up with if Steve told him he was touch-starved. Honey and sixty of her closest dancer-friends all jammed into the living room, until Steve was literally buried under cheerful naked omegas. "I'll, um, consider that."

"Do. I'll tell Maria you'll be there at 6:30. She'll fit you in. Her address is on the paper."

"Thank you, Dr Katz."

She waves that away with one broad hand. "It's what I'm here for."

Chapter End Notes

I hope to resume posting 2-3 times per week now.

Chapter 64

Steve's in the quinjet, stripping off his bloodied gloves. They're heading to Stark House, so Steve can shower and change at home instead of at the barracks at SHIELD. It was a short op, but a messy one. He had to subdue five minions in addition to the villain they were after.

"I have an appointment this evening," Steve says to Agent Rowland. "We'll need to debrief tomorrow."

"Of course," Agent Rowland says, "I know this has been a difficult week. I'm sure this particular assignment can't have been easy."

No, it hadn't been easy. Steve hates the ops when they're capturing villains for intel or to trade with foreign governments. To Steve's mind, if you've got a villain in your sights, you should either shoot them honorably or send them to jail. You shouldn't be putting them in holding cells so some counterpart across the water can offer up one of your own people in exchange.

"It needed to be done, we did it." Steve shoves the gloves in his back pocket. "That's the end of it."

"You're a good man, Captain," Agent Rowland says. "A real asset to the organization."

Steve cocks an eyebrow at him.

"I wanted to say--" Agent Rowland is usually confident and assured, but this time he stops as if he wants to phrase himself carefully. "I know we, that is SHIELD, didn't handle the situation with General Ross as well as we could have."

"You didn't handle the situation at all," Steve says flatly. "I did."

Agent Rowland tries for a smile, but it looks tense, pained. "I wanted to apologize for that."

"It's done." Steve has no intention of discussing this topic with Rowland. "So long as Ross doesn't make an ass of himself again, the matter is closed as far as I'm concerned."

"I've been looking for an opportunity when you and I were alone to talk to you about this," Rowland says.

How far are they from home? Steve hopes the helipad of Stark House will appear soon. He doesn't want Rowland to know how he feels, so he only says, "Oh?"

"Yes." Rowland leans forward a little. "We didn't handle that situation the way we should have. You deserve a full apology."

And what about Tony? It wasn't Steve who'd been manhandled in a hangar bay, and it wasn't Steve who'd have been assigned to work with some blowhard. "Thank you."

Rowland relaxes a little. "Going forward, I want to assure you that we'll do better."

There's a phrase to strike chill into a man's bones. "Do better at what?" Steve asks bluntly. "Try to upset my team? Lie to us? Manipulate us? Because I think SHIELD's been doing a pretty good job of that already."

Rowland's cheeks turn ruddy. "Captain, I can only apologize once again--"

Steve crosses his arms. "What is this about? What do you want, Agent?"

"I really did want to apologize for how SHIELD handled Ross. Leading the Avengers is a very difficult assignment, and we should have given you more backup."

No kidding. Steve just nods, though. This is going someplace else.

"After the incident in Bogota, there's been some reassignment of upper management," Rowland says.

Yes, that makes sense, but Steve has a bad feeling. He doesn't dislike Rowland. The man is competent, but he's too by the book. Steve doesn't like how Rowland had handled Sa Richardson, either.

"The director is going to be off-site a great deal during the investigation, so Agent Hill and I will be working more directly with you," Rowland says. This time his smile reaches his eyes. "I know it's a big change, but I'm looking forward to working more closely with you."

Oh no. No, no, no. "Likewise," Steve says. Should he offer to shake hands? No, that would be too formal. Besides, Steve doesn't want to make more of this than it appears. Steve will still go straight to Fury if anything big happens.

"Great," Rowland says.

He sounds sincere, and Steve feels a little guilty. He probably is a very nice man.

"I know that having Na Stark on your team has been a challenge," Rowland says, sounding earnest. "One of the reasons I was chosen for this assignment is that I have experience leading omegas."

"I thought omegas weren't allowed in military organizations these days," Steve says.

"Not in the United States. The commander of the RAF is an omega, I believe. My experience comes from working with the technicians within the forensics department of SHIELD, and some of them are omegas."

"I didn't know that," Steve says honestly. "I knew that nursing was a field open to omegas, of course, but I didn't know that forensics was."

"Technically, forensics isn't. But a lot of promising young omegas get medical technician degrees. It's a helping field, but it's a little less physically demanding than nursing can be."

Steve hopes his thoughts aren't showing on his face. "So you have a medical and science background."

Rowland smiles again. He's a lot more likeable when he smiles. "Not a lot of people do. Science isn't as exciting as fieldwork around here."

"I doubt Na Stark would agree," Steve says.

Rowland laughs, looks down. "Maybe so. That's a good segue into what I wanted to speak to you about, Captain. Hill told me that you'd been briefed on Na Stark's history."

Steve keeps his face blank. Which part of Na Stark's history is Rowland talking about? "Yes."

"With my background in omega leadership and with what I know of Na Stark, I'd like to commend you for making as much progress as you have with him." Rowland still sounds completely sincere, but there's a faint undertone to his scent that Steve can't quite make out. "As I'm sure you've realized, Na Stark is rather unique."

"He is." Steve meets Rowland's eyes. "We're lucky to have someone of his caliber. He's brilliant."

"Yes." Rowland's smile softens a little, looks much more human. "Captain--Agent Hill briefed me with more details of the aftermath of Ross's blundering. I realize this may seem more than a little intrusive, but I know you'll understand why I need to ask. She said that after having sexual relations in the hangar bay and completing your meeting, you brought Na Stark to your own room on the Helicarrier. Is that correct?"

Steve feels a slow sinking dread. "That's correct."

"I understand that everyone reported Na Stark's enthusiastic consent to the proceedings in the hangar bay and the meeting, but I was told this morning that Na Stark later left your quarters looking very agitated. He spoke only with Director Fury, returned to you only very briefly, and then he left the Helicarrier entirely looking even more agitated."

"Yes," Steve says. He can feel the sweat bead on his spine, and he hopes he's not reeking of fear or shame.

"Captain--" Rowland looks genuinely regretful, but also determined. "I know that Na Stark is a very complex individual, and I also know that some find him abrasive or insubordinate at times. He can be difficult. But he's a member of the Avengers, and as such, his welfare is my responsibility. I need to know what happened."

Oh God. Steve can't tell Rowland the truth--that Tony realized that Fury had been acting like a matchmaker. They don't know why Fury was doing it, and they don't know if it's part of

trying to wind Steve up or manipulate Steve into Fight or if it's completely separate. Besides, it's none of Rowland's business.

"I'm afraid that's personal," Steve says quietly, knowing it makes him look like the worst sort of leader in the world.

"Captain," Rowland says. Just that. Chiding. Gentle.

"I don't feel that I can share the information," Steve says, putting some earnestness into his own voice. "It wouldn't be fair to Na Stark."

Rowland sits back, but he looks almost relieved. "I see. I thought it might have been something like that."

Steve tries not to gape in bewilderment. "You do? I mean, you did?"

"Yes. It's very admirable of you to hold back out of a chivalrous idea of protecting Na Stark's privacy," Rowland says. "But times have changed, Captain. These are no longer taboo subjects. I need to understand the emotional and relationship status of the team in order to be effective and help each of you. As your handler, I have access to full files on the whole team."

"I see." Steve feels light-headed. Oh God.

"So, while it's understandable that you don't want to discuss what must feel like a personal topic," Rowland says, "I want you to understand that it's perfectly appropriate to talk about these things with me. OK?"

There's only one acceptable answer, so Steve gives it. "OK."

"Let's talk about what happened. I noticed that Na Stark wasn't present on the op today. Can you tell me what has Na Stark so upset?"

Suddenly, Steve finds it easy to talk. These stupid, incompetent bureaucrats. "You mean you don't know?"

"I have some ideas," Rowland says gently, "but it's not a good idea to make decisions based on assumptions."

"You know," Steve drawls, "if I was worried about making assumptions about how Na Stark felt, I might try asking Na Stark."

"Captain--"

"No, don't let me interfere in your policies and procedures." Steve stands up. He recognizes the aerial antennae. Good thing they're nearly home.

"I can see you're upset," Rowland says, "but I'm just trying to understand. I know from the security footage that it was a very emotional time for both of you. I want to make sure that Na Stark is all right."

Steve stares at him, shakes his head. "Nice to know you watched me get a blowjob in the hangar bay, I guess."

"Captain, this is part of my job. As the chief alpha of a complex team, your relationship with the team's omega is--"

"You want to know why Tony's upset, you should probably ask Tony. But here's a hint." Steve slides the door open, doesn't bother waiting for the rope to drop. A quick glance tells him that Stark House's helipad is right below. "A bunch of higher ups were talking about reassigning him to a whole other government agency, and nobody even bothered to invite him to the meeting."

Rowland looks startled, like that never occurred to him.

Steve gives him a smart salute. Then he steps back into the air and drops down, just because he can.

*

If only the burn of righteous anger had lasted.

Dr. Katz's friend is able to see Steve at the NYU hospital at 6:30 pm. She's doing rounds, whatever that means, but her assistant gets Steve started with the paper part of the alpha exam and a few quick blood tests.

It takes Steve nearly an hour to complete the written part of his alpha-type test. Steve answers each question as honestly as possible, even though many of the questions seem random.

At last he's done. The assistant takes the test and leads him to the doctor's office.

The sign on her door reads Dr. Maria Santos, Chief of Type-Dynamic & Para-Sexual Medicine.

Dr. Santos turns out to be a short, gray-haired beta with kind brown eyes and a firm grip. "Sit, sit," she says, shoving a stack of journals off the chair in front of her messy desk.

Steve sits carefully. It's one of those fancy ultra-modern chairs they have these days. Pretty, but kind of fragile. It's probably expensive. He's always worried his size and weight will crush these little chairs. "Thank you for seeing me, Doctor."

"Irma gave me a brief overview, and I put your test through our scoring machine. I double-checked with the military guys just to be sure. The results all say you're an alpha E-9. You have any idea what that means?"

"No, ma'am." Steve memorized whatever comments the doctors and techs made about him in the early days, but now he doesn't even pay attention. No one ever explains, and Steve's honestly bored by the medical stuff. His body is strong, it gets better on its own, test over.

"Alphas come in different flavors, because your bodies fall into a couple of different ranges and types. You're an E, which is what we in alpha-studies like to call the 'quiet alpha.' Media likes to represent strong alphas as loud bullies who tell people what to do. They get their noses out of joint over tiny bits of protocol, they whine about respect, they ruthlessly make kids and omegas behave, usually with a lot of growling and drama and dominance slaps."

Steve grimaces. Yes, he's seen too many of them in the movies, and he'd been beaten up by too many of them in real life, back in the day.

"The E's aren't like that. They're so confident, people choose to follow them. You want to find an E-rated alpha, watch people in a crisis. Upset folks all start turning to one person to get reassurance and find out what to do next. Half the time it's a middle-aged lady wearing sensible shoes, and she's got a crying kid to clinging to her. Want to know where I found a good quarter of the E-4s for my last paper?"

Steve shakes his head. He honestly has no idea.

"Middle-school teachers. Anybody who tells a bunch of thirteen year olds what to do all day long has cojones."

That makes Steve smile and look at the floor. "Yes, ma'am."

"E's are mostly quiet, cheerful, good in a crisis, very calming 99% of the time, but they have a hell of a temper. The E's are rated on the Young's Alphaistic Scale. It runs from a 1 to a 10, but nobody's a 1 or a 10. It's a math thing. The larger the number, the stronger you are."

"It's the serum," Steve says quietly.

"Wrong." Dr. Santos fishes around in her desk for a bit. She comes out with a small metal device and a plastic-covered packet. "Unless somebody swapped out your test samples back in the day, you were always an E-9. I doubt Howard Stark got his math wrong. But it doesn't really matter. You're an E-9 now."

Steve looks at her, brow furrowed. Yes, he's always been quiet and stubborn, but the reason he became a leader was that the serum made him a stronger alpha. It was in the pamphlets the Army printed. Maybe he'll ask Tony to look over his old test results.

Dr. Santos picks up the plastic package. It looks a bit like one of the takeout sleeves that have a fork, a napkin, and a packet of salt and pepper, except inside there's no plastic silverware. "This is a test designed for E-level alphas who are 7 or higher, like you. It's going to tell us how your para-sexual system is doing."

"I'm very satisfied with my private life," Steve says firmly. He'd spent the cab ride figuring out the best polite phrasing to tell the doctors to quit asking about his damn sex life.

"Glad to hear it." She pulls off the plastic. "We swab the inside of your cheek with this swab. You can do it yourself. Then we lay this doohickey against your throat here and push this button. It'll sting a little, sorry about that."

Steve obeys her directions. Unlike the SHIELD techs, she doesn't take everything away to be analyzed by super-computers. She puts the swab in a little vial of goo and swirls it around. The goo turns quite a pretty dark purple. "Hmm."

The plastic device that pricked Steve's neck gets stuck into a large box on top of her desk, which the doctor turns on. After just a few seconds, the machine flashes 67.89.42.

Dr. Santos frowns. "Hmm."

"What does 'hmm' mean?" Steve asks. He's used to the doctors at SHIELD. They never tell him anything meaningful, but they're always giving him polite chitchat. Dr. Santos's suddenly enigmatic noises are making him nervous.

"It means you're way over the range." Her eyes are kind. "Think you'd better close the door, kiddo. This could get a little personal."

Steve closes the door with a firm click.

"Strong alphas show up in different flavors, like I said, but an E9 is one of the strongest kinds available in any of 'em. The point of an alpha like you is to bring people together. You get folks to help each other. Not just your own family, your own friends, but *anyone*. That takes a lot of power. Not psychic power or some mumbo jumbo. I'm talking about emotional reserves. Emotional energy. People don't run on electricity, but physics is physics. The more power you spend, the lower your reservoir."

"So, I've overspent my reserves?" That kind of made sense.

"Yes." The doctor picks up the tube of purple goo. "This is a bad sign. Your emotional state, your ability to draw on an E-9 alpha's pack bond power, hell, even your personal depression state, is basically brain chemistry. Figure out your chemistry, figure out your emotional state. With this test, healthy brain chemistry would turn the gel *light blue*."

Steve's got a tube of paint in that dark purple color--dioxazine purple. He uses it for the shadows of black cars, ironwork, the depths of night. Light blue is a world away from that dark color. "So what do I do?"

"I'm afraid it's like any other budget. Spend less or earn more. I don't think the world would fare all that well if you quit spending. You need to earn more."

"OK," Steve says reasonably. "How do I do that?"

"In the natural order of things, we'd pop you back to your happy family and familiar world and pack mates. Since we can't.... Touch. Emotional and physical intimacy. Passionate sex. Cuddling. Lots of orgasms. Irma says you're seeing someone. Is it serious?"

Steve's mind stopped at the 'lots of orgasms'. "Uh, yes, it's serious."

"Are you currently spending the nights with your partner in a shared bed?"

Steve ducks his head. "No." It's not just Steve's desire to go slow. Tony doesn't even use the same bedroom each night. Stark House has rooms Steve still can't enter. The one time Steve laid Tony on his bed, Tony blacked out. No way are they ready for Steve to ask Tony to sleep with him every night.

"Can you change that?"

Steve refuses to use Tony's body as a weapon. Refuses. "No."

Dr. Santos absently taps the vial of goo against the desk. "Captain, I've got fifteen grandkids and a big Catholic family. We throw a quiet alpha from time to time. My eldest granddaughter is an E-7. The Church has just approved her request for a second marriage."

"I don't want to do that to Tony." Steve doesn't. It wouldn't be fair. Whatever might happen between the two of them, it's going to be because of what they choose. Not what Steve's body demands.

"Is Tony an omega, Captain?"

"That shouldn't matter. He should get to have a partner who's faithful."

"He should get to have a partner who's not going to have health problems."

"The serum--" Steve says.

"Isn't going to fix your heart if it shatters into a thousand pieces from grief."

Well, no, but it wouldn't let him die. "I don't want to hurt Tony just because I get a little lonely at night. Don't you have any other suggestions?"

"I can write you a prescription for a Compassionate Care Companion. Give it to any reputable marriage agency, and they'll find you an omega who's unable to bear children. One who's looking primarily for companionship and affection. Often past menopause. Your insurance should cover the dowry cost of several short-term contracts, enough so you can have three or four companions in your bed for the next couple of months. Lots of cuddling, sex optional, purely platonic if that's how you roll."

"Three or *four*?" Steve asks. Is she nuts?

"Captain, losing a pack isn't like losing one person. In the natural course of things, as a pack leader, as a pack member, you'd expect to lose a pack member from time to time through age-related death. You'd also expect to gain new members--when your babies are born, when your betas get married, when you court another omega who suits you."

"Yes, of course," Steve says, because he knows this.

"Losing your whole pack at once is the extreme side of grief. It's an unnatural occurrence, and it's as painful as a parent losing a child. It goes against nature, and it's going to take more than a couple of hugs to get you past it."

"I've been doing OK," Steve says, because he *has*. "I've been doing better."

"Irma says you've fallen into Fight a couple times. Captain, listen to me very carefully."

Steve frowns, because up until now Dr. Santos has been very nice. Now she looks almost angry, and she's leaning across the desk. Her scent is soft because she's a beta, but now Steve can smell a deep layer of worry as sharp as a fresh wave of grief.

"Captain, you are an E-9. An alpha decides when the pack will fight. It's why the militaries use your kind to lead assault teams--a combat team under an alpha's control will fight to the death, not by training, but by instinct."

Steve knows that, too. No matter what the Army says now, it had been beautiful and right to fight with his family. To find those Nazis and free prisoners and make the world a better place.

"E-9s lead their own pack, but their grace is bringing all people together. This is fantastic when a building needs to be evacuated, when a river is overflowing its banks, when wolves are at the gates." Her voice is sincere and powerful. "But what happens if you tip into Fight because someone makes an off-color comment about a pack-mate? Are you prepared to drag your entire team and most of the surrounding civilians into a true Fight state?"

All the color drains from Steve's face. "I wouldn't do that. I would never--I would never ask people to fight with me just because I was upset."

"You don't have to ask, that's the point," she says. "People choose to follow quiet alphas. They will go where you go and do what you do. They will fight when you fight. Are you prepared for that? Really, truly prepared?"

Steve feels sick. "I've been getting better. I have. The last time--no one was hurt. I mean, my partner, he consented to what happened. It didn't work out quite the way I'd hoped, but he said he was OK with it. That he doesn't mind."

Dr. Santos closes her eyes. "Your partner, Captain, must be very strong in his own right. It takes a great deal to control someone of your strength. But let me ask you this. Was any of your pack in the room with you when the incident happened?"

Steve frowns. "Well, no."

"Did the insults continue or were you able to stop them?"

Steve rubs the back of his neck. "I was able to stop them."

"What if the rest of your pack was there? What if the insults had kept on? What if your partner hadn't been nearby? What if you'd escalated to true Fight violence?"

Steve looks at the floor, clasps his hands between his knees. With a sick sense of certainty, Steve knows things might have ended differently.

Steve does have the vial of Kashmir, but it's only good for three doses. Whatever it takes to make the stuff means Steve can't exactly ask for more. He's already gone into a pretty serious state three times already, and if Tony's right, if someone is pushing Steve deliberately, it's going to keep happening.

Sooner or later, Steve will be away from Tony when it happens; sooner or later, Steve will be out of Kashmir. Then it will be down to Steve's own control.

Will Steve be able to hold back *every* time?

Maybe not.

"What do I need to do?" Steve asks. He's accepted the risks to himself. He's even accepted that his mate can and should decide on how to handle him. But the risk to the team, to civilians, the risk of becoming a bully--Steve has to fix this. Somehow.

Dr. Santos sits back with a little sigh of relief. "You need touch. That's the first thing. I'm pretty certain you're touch starved. E-9s also have vigorous sex drives, and sexual touch is very important. You can't just masturbate, Captain, it won't give you the hormonal response your body needs. You should make sure your sexual needs are met."

Steve nods, but he's not very happy about it. He's sick of hearing about his sexual needs as if it's like proper nutrition. This isn't biology--it's love.

"Companionship with your new pack--and oh yes, Captain, I am well aware you're building one--is also important. Spend time with them."

Steve tries not to blush. Had he directly admitted to building a new pack? He needs to be more careful.

"Have a frank and candid discussion with your partner. You're still in the courting stage, and you admitted he's an omega. Look, I deal with strong alphas all the time. It's my specialty. Most of the strong ones prefer a couple-three spouses. My granddaughter is a trauma surgeon in a shitty part of Queens and her med-school loans are crazy. She's not making big bucks, but she didn't have any trouble finding a second wife and in another year, she'll add a third."

Steve frowns at the doctor, because he just isn't comfortable talking about omegas like they're some sort of feel-good pill. You can't just walk up to a bar and ask for a double-omega on the rocks because you're an extreme alpha and you've had a bad day.

"My granddaughter Sandy's a bit like you. It didn't take her long to find someone. Trust me, the average omega has been asked to do much weirder things than legally-wedded nightly cuddling. A nice gentleman with a job and good looks shouldn't find it hard to talk his current partner into this, either. You're going to attract plenty of willing ladies to fill your bed."

Steve hates this. He hates the way she phrases everything like he's some horny teenager who just needs to get laid. Like Tony's needs are completely irrelevant compared to Steve's.

"Look, you had several pack omegas last time," the doctor asks. "What's different now?"

Besides the whole world deciding he's a freak now? Tony. "I've picked my mate. Before, they were shared. He matters. More than anything."

"And does he feel the same way about you?"

"I don't know." Steve hopes so, but--

"Find out. I think you're making this a lot harder than it needs to be. Don't borrow trouble. A lot of Os will be perfectly happy to have a second around the house. It's a big help with the childcare and housework, but a lot of times they just seem happier if there's two of them. Like making sure to get two kittens when you wanted a single cat."

Steve is so appalled he can't think of a single thing to say.

"But if he does have a problem with a second spouse, Captain, then you just need to be firm. Not mean, just be firm and clear. This is an important sexual and physical need for you. If he's resistant, it's probably just worry."

Be firm that Tony has no say in whether Steve takes a second spouse. The awful thing is that just a year ago, Steve might have seen it just like the doctor. This is what the alpha needs, so the omega should understand. If not, be firm and clear.

"Reassure him about how much you care, how attractive you find him," the doctor says kindly. "You can take him to speak with your counselor or a pastor. Lots of Os these days have been told they're supposed to be enough on their own, and that it's a personal failing if they're not. A good priest will set his mind at ease about that."

There is just no way that Steve can explain how impossible it would be to haul *Tony Stark* to Queen of the Holy Rosary to speak to the Father there about Steve's need for multiple spouses. If Tony didn't set the church aflame, it would be a miracle.

"Thank you, doctor," Steve says instead.

"You don't have to order up a second spouse off Craigslist," she says impatiently. "I can tell what you're thinking. At least get permission to see other people. Irma tells me you're a good Catholic boy, but even the Church allows cuddling. Find someone your courted mate will let you snuggle with at the movies."

Steve nods slowly. Tony will be incandescent, but he'd at least hear Steve out.

Probably.

*

Between the doctor appointments and the training session in a muddy icy field in the freezing wet, Steve has a vicious headache by the time he makes it home.

The serum is supposed to prevent headaches, but it doesn't.

Steve flops on the couch in the living room, tired, all his good cheer vanished. It may never come back--especially if any more junior agents say, "But Captain, the regs saaaay," in that particular irritating whine they all seem to know.

He props his feet on the coffee table and tries not to think of anything.

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. Would Tony's special whiskey work on headaches? It's got to be worth a try. Even after his twenty minute hot shower, Steve can still feel the shadow of sleet in his hair.

Instead of taking a cab home, he'd walked from the doctor's office. He'd hoped it would help--but it just made things worse.

He shoves up off the couch. Where had Tony kept that white lightning? Under the counter at the bar. Yep, there's still a bunch of bottles left. Tony had bought it for him, special. Had thought about Steve, had considered the serum, had figured out a way to slide right around the laws of physics so Steve could have a drink at poker like the rest of them.

Steve ignores the shot glass and takes a tumbler, pours in four fingers. When he slams it back, the clear liquid is like hot glory all the way down his throat into his belly.

Steve finishes his drink, feeling a little warmer.

*

Steve's still on the couch when Tony finally gets home. Steve hears him take the stairs two at a time, boots a cheerful clomp all the way up.

Steve sets his book to the side just in time. Tony throws himself onto the couch, sprawls in Steve's lap, looks up at him with a broad grin. "Miss me, gorgeous?"

It's impossible not to grin back. Tony's cheerfulness is infectious. "Every minute of every day. The pictures helped, though."

Tony laughs, a deep warm sound Steve hasn't heard before. Oh, he's heard Tony laugh, sure, but not like this--so relaxed, almost young. "Good."

Steve can't help running his fingers through Tony's wild curls. They're getting long and unkempt and they twine around his fingers. His hair is surprisingly soft, no product at all, and Tony snuggles in with a happy sigh. Also unlike his usual tense self.

If he gets a lapful of snuggly Tony out of it, Steve is going to arrange a bunch more of these vacations. The lines around Tony's eyes are softer, and there are fewer shadows under his eyes, too, as if Tony's gotten sleep. Steve would also swear that Tony's almost put on weight--weight he badly needs.

For a few moments, all Steve does is reassure himself of his mate's warm presence, carding through that ridiculous hair, stroking his shoulders, gently caressing the nape of Tony's neck to make him rumble in pleasure.

The clothes Tony is wearing now look nothing like the fancy gray suit he'd had on when he left. A tight dark tee shirt that shows off the lines of his shoulders. Jeans. Boots. A handful of necklaces made of black leather tails and little charms. A smudge of eyeliner. Steve's seen this look before, in photographs Na Anderson showed him from Tony's teenage years.

It's also how Tony dresses on their dates.

Steve toys with the hem of the tee shirt, plays with the whisper of olive skin. "Did you dress for me?"

"Mmmhmm," Tony says, stretching. "Like it?"

"Very much." Steve leans down and kisses him.

Tony opens up like he's been waiting for nothing else his whole life. His arms twine around Steve's neck, holding him close. He makes the most amazing noises-- moans and soft gasps and little whimpers. He squirms around in Steve's lap, loose and easy and eager.

Steve loses himself in the kiss for a long time.

Finally, Steve slips his arms under Tony's shoulders to haul him upright so he's sitting up in Steve's lap.

Tony blinks sex-dazed eyes at him. "Please don't tell me we have to go on a bunch more dates before I can get lucky."

Steve laughs. "No." He isn't going to be able to refuse Tony when he's like this, and honestly, why should he?

"Oh, thank God," Tony says, wriggling closer and nibbling on Steve's lower lip. "I've been desperate. You've cruelly deprived me. You have no idea how I've suffered."

"Uh huh," Steve says, amused. "You looked like you were suffering this morning."

"Mmm." Tony pulls back, lowers his lashes. "Did you like it?"

Steve's amazed at how coy Tony can sound when he wants to, as pretty a tease as a movie starlet. "You're sitting in my lap, Tony. What do you think?"

Tony shifts around, rubbing himself against Steve's hard cock appreciatively. "I asked Terrence to take it, but I haven't actually seen it. Jarvis, throw it up on the screen, will you?"

Steve is really going to have to rethink having technology everywhere. Maybe it does come in handy. The picture is of Tony in bed with Sa Richardson. It's the same huge four poster from before, but this time, both omegas are naked, both deeply asleep. Sa Richardson's hair is fetchingly mussed and his form is pale in the light of early morning, a beautiful contrast to Tony's darker skin.

Their limbs are tangled, and they're curled in a little pile, blankets shoved aside instead of on top of them.

Steve has a sudden memory of Dr. Santos saying, "A lot of times they just seem happier if there's two of them. Like making sure to get two kittens when you wanted a single cat."

That's what they look like--two kittens curled up.

Tony isn't looking at the picture. He's looking at Steve. When Steve realizes, he jolts a little, caught out.

"It's OK, Steven," Tony says quietly. "Do you like it?"

Steve looks back at him. "You know I do."

Tony leans in and noses at Steve's throat. Tony's often bold, but he doesn't do this, even after their dates. Usually Tony lets Steve take control of their kisses and lovemaking. Steve automatically buries his hands in Tony's hair to hold him against his throat, his own head thrown back as Tony nuzzles against the most sensitive place. God, it feels good.

Tony pulls away at last, but instead of going in for a kiss, he drags Steve's mouth to his own throat and jaw.

Steve's breath catches.

He'd been able to smell it as soon as the door opened, but this is like falling into nothing but pure sex. All the blood leaves Steve's head and goes straight to his cock.

Tony smells of iron and fire, earth and summer, the scent grounded with someone that Steve doesn't know, like clay bank ferns under old trees by a creek, all shady and cool. The forest smell must be Terrence. It's lovely, but Steve's senses are already ignoring it.

The iron and fire is twined with the freshly exposed earth, washed all over by summer sunlight, the pleasure lighting a line of warmth all the way down Steve's spine to his cock.

Steve's mouth is fastened on Tony's neck before he knows what's happening. Steve's growling and turning them so he can tumble Tony down on the couch. Tony falls back with a little oof noise. Steve slides his mouth to the side and tastes his skin again.

Sweat and sex, pleasure, togetherness, summer.

"Steven, shh," Tony's saying. He's holding Steve's head against his throat. "I didn't know it would take you so hard, gorgeous."

Steve nips hard at the line of scars.

Tony throws his head back. "Christ, keep doing that. Wait. Nnngh. Was supposed to talk to you about--God, I don't even remember, don't stop."

Steve has no intention of stopping. Tony's skin tastes fantastic, and Steve's bites are bringing the scent up. Opening him.

"God, yes, gorgeous, come on, yeah, like that." Tony's wrapped his legs around Steve's hips and he's arching up, trying to get friction against Steve's cock. "Fuck me. Come on, Steve, please."

Steve pulls back so he can bite Tony's mouth, teasing. "Didn't you get fucked enough?"

"Didn't get fucked by *you*," Tony says, rubbing himself shamelessly against Steve. "Come on, gorgeous, I just want your cock. I've been sooo good."

Steve fastens his mouth on the join of jaw and throat, sucks hard to draw the scent up even more. It's like getting drunk. "You have been good. Come on, up."

Tony scrambles out from under Steve quick as anything. Steve runs his hands over Tony's shirt, tugging, and Tony takes the hint. He pulls his shirt off, the boots, the necklaces, the jeans. He's not wearing any underwear, and Steve can smell the delirious summer earth of Alex on him.

It's easy to grip the back of Tony's neck and guide him down. Tony slides bonelessly to his knees in front of the couch, looking up, and Steve's fingers tighten just a bit. Tony's eyes go heavy lidded and he looks so beautiful Steve almost gives in.

But he wants something else. Something important.

Steve's fingers fumble his jeans open, get his cock out. He's sitting on the edge of the couch now, legs spread.

It takes no pressure at all to guide Tony forward by the back of the neck, watch Tony's eager mouth slide down onto his cock. Watch Tony's eyes widen a little when Steve thrusts in deep with a low grunt.

This isn't going to take long, because Steve's far too close already. Teased by weeks of dating and days of pictures and the scent of Tony mingled with pleasure and summer.

Tony seems to know what Steve wants, or maybe, Steve realizes, Tony was telling the truth all along. Tony seems delighted to wrap his mouth around Steve's length, and he keeps making happy pleased sounds. Sexy but cheerful, like this is the best gift he's been given, like sucking Steve's cock is Christmas and his birthday rolled into one.

Tony and sex is always erotic, but a cheerful Tony and sex is impossible.

Steve's coming before he even realizes it, and it takes all the self-control of years in combat to draw back the way he wants. Steve shoots against Tony's open mouth, his chin, and then, dragging Tony by the hair because he can barely think, right against Tony's neck, right against the scars, right against where Steve's scent should live always.

It lasts only a few seconds, and then Steve's slumped on the couch, breathing heavily, eyes shut.

Steve may never move again.

Ever.

His fingers are still wrapped in Tony's too-long hair, and it's probably painful. Steve sort of pats the back of Tony's neck, hoping to make it better, but honestly too tired to do a good job.

After a while, Steve manages to open his eyes.

Tony's staring right at him. "Jesus Christ, Rogers. What the hell was that?"

Steve's eyes slide shut again. "No idea."

"Oh no way. Don't play that come and roll over to sleep game with me, mister. Wakey wakey."

Steve yawns. He's actually very comfortable. No need to roll over. He could sleep right here.

"Steeeeve. Come on, gorgeous. I was a very good boy. Don't I get a treat, too?"

Steve tugs very gently and Tony climbs happily into his lap, looking cheerful and smug. As well he might. Steve's never come that hard in his life. Not even during heat-sex.

As soon as Tony is close, though, Steve resettles him, remembering exactly what he'd been wanting to do.

Tony's watching him curiously, face and neck still marked, and he doesn't pull away when Steve slides his fingers through the mess. Steve makes sure there's plenty against the scent glands at Tony's throat, laid over the deep scent already there. Then Steve smears the rest over the most sensitive part of Tony's neck.

"Nnngh," Tony says, eyes sliding shut.

"Mmhm." Steve swirls his finger over Tony's mouth one last time. "Ready?"

Tony's eyes open again. He blinks softly, the way he does when he's fully under. "I get another treat?"

Steve answers by spreading Tony's legs just enough to slip his hand between them and slide his wet finger all the way inside.

Tony's head tips back and he moans, long and low. He's wet from arousal, but Steve can also feel that he's loose.

Recently fucked, still sticky with it.

Steve plays with his opening, plunging his finger in and out, in and out, until Tony's shivering. Steve gives him what he wants, a second finger, and a nice rough rhythm, a steady deep fuck.

Tony's whining softly, like he's getting close. Steve has been watching his face the whole time, drinking in how open Tony's expression is, how relaxed he is. This isn't just the spell that touching his neck casts, this is a bone deep level of safety. And, Steve suspects, love.

Steve dips his head and fastens his mouth against the scent gland, right over the scars, tastes himself, tastes Alex. He gives his fingers one last twist inside Tony's body, right over the sweet spot he's sure is just there, and holds Tony close as Tony flies apart, shaking with pleasure.

Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

> Thank you to my lovely beta, R. This chapter is shorter than usual for narrative effect. Also, it's a little more upsetting, so if you prefer, you can wait until tomorrow when I will have posted the followup chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony hauls his giant toolbox behind him. The Helicarrier is full of people no matter the hour, and technically, it's not even late. Everyone seems busy but not in a 'the world is ending' way.

"You know, all I wanted was twenty fucking minutes of afterglow. Was that too much to ask? Our first time having sex as normal people and we get hauled off to the ass crack of nowhere."

"Technically, Sir, you had thirty one minutes of afterglow," Jarvis says from the phone tucked in Tony's shirt pocket.

"Afterglow is like the reverse of dog years. Every seven minutes counts as one minute." Tony drags the tool box around some huge podium or other. He's following the trail of blackened soot and the smell of weird charred....something.

"If it is any consolation, I believe Captain Rogers was also dismayed by the shortness of your time together. He expressed his displeasure forcefully on his own phone call."

"Yeah, well, at least he was still wearing his damn pants." Tony's really regretting not taking the time to put them back on before falling asleep on Steve's lap. He'd just gotten all comfortable, though, and they were supposed to be alone. Who the hell expected Clint to dash in and start talking about all these damn alerts? "Who programmed the video conference with fucking Hill to just pop up in the damn living room whenever that fucker wants to chat?"

"I believe that was you, Sir," Jarvis says.

"I was out of my goddamned mind," Tony mutters. "Change it when we get back."

"Certainly, Sir."

Tony glances up to see a familiar figure in a well-cut dark gray suit hurrying toward him. "Damn. Robo-agent incoming."

"Entering Robo-agent stealth eavesdropping mode, Sir."

"You're a laugh riot, Jarvis," Tony mutters, but quietly. Rowland is nearly upon him and he looks like he's going to touch the toolbox. "No," Tony says sternly. "I carry this baby myself. No helping."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of course, Na Stark." Agent Rowland smiles that cheerful smile of his. Fucking creepy. "Would you like me to get you a palette to help lift it, at least?"

Tony rolls his eyes, drops the end of the box, and picks it up by the handle. The whole thing is huge and, yes, full of tools. But he spends his day whaling away at metal with hammers and dancing in a damn tank-suit. "I can lift my own toolbox." After a few steps, he sets it down again and picks up the end strap to start hauling it like a sled again. "I just prefer to let physics make it easier."

"No, of course, of course." Agent Rowland's long legs take one stride for each of Tony's two, and they must look absurd. "I thought I'd just lead you to the problem."

"Kind of following the old smoke trail," Tony says drily, tipping his head towards the black sooty marks everywhere and the general scent of charring.

"Yes, well, unfortunately, the trail splits up ahead." Rowland sounds real for the first time--real, annoyed, and crabby. "Our strike team wasn't able to keep the villains to one locale. We need you in Engine Bay 4."

"You coulda sent a flunky for that," Tony points out.

They're nearing Engine Bay 4, and Tony's already assessing the damage. It looks like some kind of weird round projectiles got hurled at things but didn't explode. Strange. Huh. Tony's mind is fixated on possible shape and velocity of projectile to create that impact pattern.

"I've been trying to have a private word with each of the team," Rowland says earnestly. "I know you're very busy. I thought maybe we could talk while you work."

Jesus Christ. "Can you hand me wrenches of the correct size? Otherwise, I'll tell you now--no fucking way."

"I think I can hand you wrenches of the correct size," Rowland says gravely.

"We'll see," is all Tony says to that.

The engine is indeed a mess. Tony starts ripping off plating to get at the innards, and Rowland doesn't interrupt him even once to offer to help with the hard bits.

Maybe the guy isn't a complete asshole.

Tony's stuck halfway inside, legs dangling out, squirming around to reach the stupid motherfucking piece of machinery that needs fixing. He's got a flashlight clamped between his teeth, and he's already torn open a knuckle on his left hand. It's bleeding like a son of a bitch, but Tony's nearly there. Nearly there--

"3/8ths wrench," Tony snaps, holding out his free hand.

A wrench is slapped into his palm, and Tony maneuvers himself the rest of the way inside. Aha! It's even an actual 3/8ths. Will wonders never cease. Maybe Rowland can live.

Tony gets the bolts undone. Then he realizes there's no closeable pockets on this fucking shirt and he's not wearing his work overalls. He tucks the bolts into his mouth--gross. He has really got to start dressing the part....

When he squirms back out, he's holding a huge chunk of piping hot metal and gears and wires. It's still smoking, but not totaled, so Tony sets it on the ground while he spits out the bolts into his palm.

"Were those in your mouth?" Rowland asks, mildly horrified.

He offers Tony a handkerchief. Tony takes it, staring at it blankly. "Oh, right. Gotta wipe the spit off the bolts or they'll rust. Good thinking. Might not be all stainless steel."

"I was actually thinking for your bleeding hand, but OK." Rowland sounds amused, which is a nice change.

Tony crouches down on his haunches to peer at the smoking mess of engine. "Yeah, I bang up my hands a lot. I'll get to the band aids in a sec. Blood's kind of a problem when you're trying to do wiring. Hmm."

Absently, Tony cleans each of the bolts and sets them in a neat row beside the chunk of engine. "Hmm."

"What are you thinking?" Rowland asks, sounding oddly respectful.

Tony blinks, coming back from the schematics in his head with a jolt. "Oh, you're still here. Uh, it's going to have to cool some before I can disassemble it for a repair. Maybe twenty minutes."

"OK," Rowland says. He's sitting cross-legged, and Tony's toolbox is opened to display the rack of wrenches next to him. Huh. Almost as if he was prepared to hand over wrenches. Weird.

Tony goes back to staring at the engine part, tipping his head this way and that, thinking of other repairs he could make to it. Possible upgrades. "Jarvis, get us the specs on sub-section 42, wiring and gears, while we wait, will you? Make it 3D holo, check for assorted parts compatibility, then send it to my phone and SHIELD email. Ping me when you're done."

"Certainly, Sir. Will you be wanting a repair diagnostic as well?"

Tony eyes the smoky mess. "No, I think I know what's wrong with this one. But do a diagnostic imagining on sub-section 38 and 53. Those are next, once we get 42 back up and running."

"Of course, Sir."

Tony readjusts the phone in his pocket, and checks absently for a pack of band aids that Steve makes sure live in all his work pants now. This one has little flowers on it.

"Alcohol wipe?" Rowland asks, offering one.

"Oh hey, thanks." Tony takes it, surprised. Huh. SHIELD agents do get banged up sometimes. Or maybe Rowland found one in the toolbox. Well, whatever.

"Since we need to wait on the parts to cool, would this be an all right time to talk?"

Tony finishes getting grime and grease out of his knuckle. "About what?"

"With the Director working on the Bogota situation, Hill and I will be working more directly with your team. I've been assigned as your handler for the foreseeable future."

"Not Hill?"

"She's taking over more of the Director's administrative duties while he's working the case."

Makes sense. This might or might not relate to the way someone has been fucking with Steve and the team. Something to think about. "So, talk."

"I wanted to take a chance to meet with each team member individually. I always do when I get assigned a team. In this case, I'm very honored to get a chance to work more closely with you."

"Uh huh." Tony pokes absently at the cooling metal. No, still very hot.

"I think it's important that you know I've worked with omegas in an administrative capacity before," Rowland says.

Tony glances up, keeping his expression neutral. "Really."

"Yes. During my time in Forensics, I worked with many omegas."

"Bully for you. Did you decide to mention it for some particular reason or just as a conversational ice-breaker?" Tony is certain Rowland has a reason, and he's not going to like it. At all.

"I have a reason." Rowland hesitates. Oh yeah, here it comes. "I'd hoped to ease into a discussion about your role on the team."

"My role on the team," Tony repeats flatly.

"I want you to understand that I have some experience, and some training, in team dynamics involving omegas. It can be complicated, and there are important power differentials involved."

"No kidding."

"Na Stark, as far as I'm concerned, you are every bit as important a member of the team as any other Avenger. You safety and well-being, including your emotional happiness, are crucial to the success of the team."

"If the Avengers have to be emotionally happy to save the world, the world is fucking doomed."

Rowland laughs. "No. I'm not saying that. But I think administration's role is to make sure things run smoothly, and the team's happiness should be a factor. Do you remember when Agent Romanoff was sent to Pakistan?"

Tony's hand stills on the piece of metal he's dragging off the engine part to clean. When Barton had lost his shit? "Yes, I remember."

"That's not the call I would have made."

"You'd have sent her elsewhere?"

"I'd have marked Agent Romanoff as assigned to low-stakes, local ops for six months, using the bereavement protocol. She's a wonder in the field, sure, but we have other agents. It was more important to focus on returning Agent Barton to safe, active duty."

If Rowland is lying, Tony can't sense it. The man seems--and smells--sincere. "Fair enough. Cap got that rammed through to the higher-ups eventually."

"Yes, he did. But he shouldn't have had to. I'd like to provide the team with better and more nuanced handling."

"Knock yourself out." Tony means it--mostly. He doesn't think Rowland can do it, but hey, the guy is going to try anyway. Might as well give him a go ahead.

"Which brings me to you, Na Stark. I'd like to talk about the incident last week."

Oh. Right. "When SHIELD let General Numb Nuts Ross dick around with Cap?"

"Is that how you see it, Na Stark?"

Damn. Tony should have phrased that differently. "Pretty much. Ross doesn't own me. I'm a civvie. He can't get me re-assigned if I don't want to be. And boy howdy, I would not like to be assigned to him."

"It was inappropriate to have that discussion without you present," Rowland says.

"It was inappropriate to have that discussion, period," Tony says, viciously cleaning the small metal part in his hands with the ruined handkerchief.

"Na Stark," Rowland says softly. There's an odd scent to him, and Tony's nose wrinkles, trying to figure it out. It's almost...gentle. Weird.

Tony glares up at him. "What?"

"SHIELD is very lucky to have you, Na Stark. I know that omega treatment on military bases and within military codes can be--less than ideal. Not always ethical."

Tony goes back to working on his parts. "We're not allowed to serve in the military. Except on our backs. Although I guess an exception can be made--sometimes they let us serve on all fours."

Rowland doesn't even wince. "It's very important to me, as an agent, as your handler, as a member of SHIELD, that you be able to serve. You have the finest engineering and scientific mind of your generation, Na Stark, and--"

Tony snorts. "You just want me to build you bombs instead of having me build bombs for them."

"Maybe I want you to repair flying engines," Rowland says, leaning forward a little to poke at a part.

"Whatever." Tony goes back to work. Metal parts he understands. All this creepy flattery is just weird. Weird and upsetting.

"All right," Rowland says, but he sounds like he's a little sad. The guy's got a screw loose. "I'd like to discuss how the situation with Ross played out. I understand that Captain Rogers found you where you were working and requested sexual relations with you."

Holy mental whiplash batman. "Yeah. I blew him in the hangar bay. Why? You want a repeat performance?"

"No thank you, Na Stark. I wanted to ask you how you felt about it."

Tony stares at him, baffled. "You want to know how I felt about it."

"Yes." Rowland sounds firm. "I realize that you may believe it's outside the bounds of my role, but given the team dynamics and your gender, it's important that I understand."

"I felt that Cap was staking a claim. I was cool with it. I told him he could." Tony can just see the possible horrifying implications of saying absolutely anything else. Rowland would have Steve's neck in an administrative noose faster than you could sexual harassment.

"As a personal relationship or as the team leader?" Rowland asks.

Tony frowns. "With him, it's one and the same." Even though it kind of wasn't.

"I see. I'm glad to hear it was consensual." Rowland smiles, but he still looks Concerned with a capital C. "I've seen the footage, of course, but I wanted to ask you."

Tony's eyebrows fly up. "I guess probably everybody at SHIELD's seen that little home porno now."

"Does it make you uncomfortable that I viewed it?"

Fucking hell. Tony tosses aside the cleaned metal piece and grabs a new one. "There's plenty of video of me fucking out there. I don't have any shame. Ask anybody."

"Na Stark, I'm sorry. I wish I could have asked your permission before viewing the footage, but it was necessary. I needed to be fully briefed on the situation."

"It's fine," Tony says. Of course it's fine. Why wouldn't it be fine? "I think this is maybe cool enough."

Rowland touches the back of his hand gently, stopping him. "It's not cool enough. It's still steaming. You'll burn yourself. Na Stark, I'm sorry."

Tony jerks his hand back. "Whatever."

"Na Stark," Rowland says again. "I'm aware that you may have some very strong emotional triggers about being photographed in sexual situations against your will."

All the blood drains from Tony's face. He tucks himself away, scooting back a good foot and a half before he can stop himself. "I don't talk about that."

"I apologize for bringing it up. Would you like me to see that the footage is destroyed?"

"Yeah, right. It's downloaded on half the staff personal computers by now." Tony hadn't even thought about it, because he'd been busy with other things. The idea that someone has pictures of Steve-- It doesn't matter if there are photos of Tony. There are lots of pictures of Tony. But that had been something that was just theirs. It was supposed to be between them. Not private, but--theirs.

"I could still try," Rowland says. "I'm sure one of the tech teams could find a way to do a global sweep."

"It's on YouTube by now. Forget it." Tony sneaks out a hand to grab another chunk of engine part. It's hot, but he ignores the heat to rip the part off the main housing.

Rowland's quiet for a time, and Tony's nothing but grateful. His hands are trembling a little as he works on the hot metal he's removed. At least Rowland doesn't comment on that.

"I realize this is a painful topic, but I need to know what happened in Captain Rogers' bedroom," Rowland says at last.

Tony's hands fumble and he cuts his forefinger on a sharp piece sticking out. He sticks his finger in his mouth and glares at Rowland. Asshole.

"I've seen the security footage. You left his room looking very distressed. You went directly to the Director's office. When you left the Director's office, you returned to Captain Rogers, but only for two minutes, then you left the Helicarrier entirely, looking even more distressed. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Sounds like you think you know already."

Rowland removes an alcohol pad from his suit coat pocket, offers it. "I'd like to know from you directly."

"Asked Steve already, didn't you?" Tony ignores the alcohol wipe. He's not taking one more single thing from this jerk.

"Yes." Rowland sits back a little. "He was on an op. I'd have asked you first, but you've been out of town."

"No, you'd still have asked him first. Don't fucking lie to me."

"Captain Rogers, like many military alphas, has a strong sexual possessive streak. He would be very upset if I approached you about a sexual situation without asking him first."

"And Captain Rogers is Captain America, so we do what he wants." Tony slaps a band aid on his cut finger and puts enough pressure on it to bruise.

"In this case, yes. I'm sorry. We didn't want to trigger any additional Fight instincts."

Right. Like Tony could possibly forget. He hates this conversation, he hates Rowland, he hates his goddamn life. "Since you've got all the answers, maybe you could just leave me out of it."

"I still need to know what happened in his bedroom."

"I woke up, I was pissed at Fury for dicking Steve around, I told Fury off, I grabbed my keys from Steve's bedroom, and I went home. I'd just gotten banged in front of a bunch of people at work, so excuse me if I wanted a little private time to think."

"All right." Rowland doesn't sound like he believes this, but he lets it go. Thank fuck. "I'm sorry that I had to press."

"You're really not, but what the fuck ever. Now, ask me whatever else you gotta ask, then let me get back to work."

Rowland's eyes track his face, and Tony looks away. "Na Stark, the personality types of the team and the gender preferences of each, as well as strong cultural pressures, combine to make it likely that Captain Rogers will find you a desirable sexual partner."

"Yeah, well, since he fucked my mouth in the hangar bay, I'd say that's accurate."

Rowland goes on. "However, your own sexual preferences as well as your personal history indicate that he may not be an ideal choice for you."

"Are you fucking serious? You want me to break up with Steve?"

"I'm not suggesting anything of the kind. I only want to talk to you about the implications of this situation and find out how you feel. There are also some other factors in play."

"What other factors?" God, Tony feels rattled. Of all the fucking bizarre shit--now SHIELD doesn't want him to fuck Steve? Make up your minds, people.

Rowland looks genuinely regretful. "Captain Rogers is an E-9 alpha."

Fucking hell. Tony gives in and grabs the big chunk of metal, drags it over, and starts working on it. It's still hot, but it doesn't matter. "Not real common."

"No." Rowland watches him for a time.

"If he goes into Fight again, you think he's gonna cause an international incident."

"It's likely, yes." Rowland puts his hand on Tony's, stills him. "I'm not recommending that you increase sexual relations in order to calm him."

"That's the traditional treatment for a tough alpha on the edge. Fuck it out of them."

"Na Stark, you're a sexual assault survivor. It would be grossly irresponsible of me to recommend a baseline increase in sexual relations between the two of you. You still haven't told me what really happened in Captain Rogers' bedroom."

"He didn't do anything." Tony sounds desperate, but this is like his worst nightmare. "It's not Steve's fault."

"It's not anyone's fault, Na Stark. You're fine, just as you are. Hey, shh, it's OK."

Oh my God, his new handler is trying to comfort him. Tony shoves backwards. "You can't get mad at Steve over this. You *can't*."

"I'm not mad at Captain Rogers." Rowland sounds so gentle. It's terrifying. "Na Stark, I won't hurt the captain. I promise."

Tony's backed into the wall now, breathing hard. He can feel the panic building in tiny little waves, and he shoves it back. "I don't want to be here. I don't want to talk about this."

"It's all right," Rowland says, and his scent is much stronger now, like the volume just got turned up high.

Tony jerks his head away. It's full of 'obey obey' pheromones, and the notes of autumn are making his head ache. "Fucking quit that."

Rowland ducks his head and sighs. "I apologize."

"Whatever." Tony just wants to get out of here. Get away from the panic and the clawing fear and the hard knot in his gut. He's tipped his head back, baring his neck, and he didn't

even notice. God, he is off his fucking game.

"We need to finish talking about this. I know it's painful, but if we don't talk about it now, we'll need to talk about it later. Which would you prefer?"

"I hate you." It's childish, but Tony is way past caring. "I fucking hate you. All of you. You think you know exactly what to do, all the damn time."

"Not all the time." Rowland exhales slowly. "I'm sorry that you hate me."

"Tough shit." Tony snatches up the closest metal part and fiddles with it. "One of your techs could probably have done this repair."

"Now or later, Na Stark. Which is it going to be?"

Asshole. Tony drops the part and it clatters. Tony hates that his hands are shaking, so he picks it back up. Plays with it. "Now. I don't want any more appointments with you than I can avoid."

"Then, since it's now, I need to make you aware of some recent medical tests that were performed on Captain Rogers."

Tony looks up. "Steve's ill?"

"Not ill, no, but his para-sexual system is badly depleted. After the most recent Fight incident, he saw a specialist. She ran several tests. As an E-9 alpha, Captain Rogers is an ideal leader for a team like this, but as you seem to be aware, the E-9s have some requirements."

Tony stares down at his engine part. It's covered in soot and grease, still warm. He wipes it clean with a thumbnail. "You want him to date somebody else. Somebody that he can fuck. Right?"

"That's not how I would have put it, Na Stark." Rowland edges closer, still trying to be gentle, but right now, Tony doesn't want him in his personal space at all. He edges back, and Rowland edges forward until they're doing a stupid dance around the metal flooring.

"But it's what you mean. Is SHIELD gonna set up some mixers for him? Get him a Russian omega off Ebay?"

"Na Stark," Rowland says, and it's almost painful how earnest he sounds. "This isn't supposed to be a punishment."

"Yeah, right. I'm declared sexiest fucking plaything by Maxim twice over and SHIELD tells me I'm not banging my boyfriend enough, so they have to bring in a backup. That's not humiliating at all."

"Na Stark, please understand that this isn't just about the sexual relations. Yes, Captain Rogers likely has a higher sex drive than comparable alphas of a lower rating, but he also has heightened emotional needs."

Tony hunches up. "Which I can't fulfill because I'm as broken as the day is long. Hey, are we done here? Because I think we're done here."

"On the contrary, our reports indicate that you're doing an admirable job of fulfilling Captain Rogers' emotional needs. He's been very forthcoming about that."

Only because Steve doesn't have anybody else to compare it to, obviously.

"We'd like him to have some additional emotional connections in part so that it will take the pressure off your relationship. So that you can choose when and if to pursue it."

If? Jesus, they really do want Steve to dump him. Tony should know better, but it just hurts. "You think he's better off with someone else."

"I think any high rated alpha would be glad to have you," Rowland says softly. "You have an exceptional mind, a very generous heart, and a lot of life experience. I'm sure that you'd be an excellent partner."

Tony feels suddenly light-headed. "But I can't bond. That's it, isn't it. You want someone who can bond to him."

"Now, Na Stark, it's not that." Rowland doesn't smell directly of deception, but there's something off about his autumn prairie scent. "But given the Captain's past emotional losses, don't you think he could use some extra support?"

Tony's trapped, but this is Steve. "Yeah. I guess."

"It's going to be all right, Na Stark. Now, I saw from your records that you're a Roanoke and your morphology is a full extreme with a preferred masculine presentation. Is that correct?"

Tony looks up at him from his hunched over posture. He hasn't heard his body talked about that way in a while. "I've got double the sex organs, yeah. You asking to see the goods or something?"

Rowland ignores that. "According to our records, you are a Klennecky 8.5 or 8.6 omega. Are you aware of that?"

"So what? Nobody gives a shit about that."

"I care about that. It means you're especially sensitive, Na Stark."

Yeah, great. "I'm just a barrel of fun. Either get to the fucking point or I'm leaving."

Rowland doesn't point out that Tony doesn't have the suit. "Your line and your rating, plus your psychiatric records, indicate that you have a strong preference for alphas above a 7. You also have a strong secondary sexual preference for being submissive."

Tony stares at the smooth metal floor--all polished steel plates with beautifully even rivets. His stomach is in knots.

"It's my understanding that any omegas above a Klennecky 7 often find comfort in being part of a more traditional marriage."

Tony's heart is pounding fast, and he wishes that he could blame the reactor. "You want me to stay home and raise Steve's kids."

"Na Stark, would you find it distasteful if we were able to arrange some additional omega sexual partners for Captain Rogers?"

His hands are sweating, but Tony shoves backward so he's braced against the metal housing of the engine. It's warm and humming against his back. He turns his head to the side, and he knows it's submissive and he doesn't care, because it doesn't matter and nothing matters.

"They'll be fully screened," Rowland says softly. "We'll only choose potential partners that you would also find enjoyable."

"Leave me out of it," Tony says. His voice is way too strained. Hard. He has to get out of here.

"Na Stark, they will, at the very least, be visiting your home. If Captain Rogers is to sleep, he needs--"

Tony's shaking all over. "Does Steve know about this plan? Has anybody told him he gets to sleep in a pile of SHIELD-approved omega fuck buddies?"

"Captain Rogers visited the doctor only early this evening," Rowland says.

Tony's stomach drops. Steve knew? He knew and he didn't even say anything? No, wait. That must be why he wanted to fuck when Tony got home. Maybe, if Tony can talk him into it, Steve will be able to get by with just Tony. No. If he's really an E-9--

"At the moment, we have your personal preferences for your omega partners listed as: Sexually skillful, physically attractive, emotionally mature, and confident. Do you have a specific gender preference? In the past, our records indicate that--"

"I can't do this," Tony says conversationally. "I can't sit here and chat about what I like in bed. Get somebody else to fix your fucking mess. I'm going home."

"It's now or later. I'm sorry, but we need to proceed quickly."

"Yeah, before Steve strokes out. Don't worry, I'll be sure to fuck his brains out three times a day until we have our next little chat." Tony gets up, feeling like every joint in his body is betraying him.

Rowland scrambles to his feet. "I'd really rather you didn't."

"What I do with my body isn't up to you." Tony's feeling horribly light-headed. God, he better not pass out. He'd been feeling so much better when he was at Alex's. Alex--Tony almost laughs hysterically.

"Technically, no, but your actions have affects on others. And yourself. I don't want you to jeopardize your own health to--"

Tony shoves past him rudely. That fucker needs to stop talking.

"Na Stark, please wait."

Rowland is coming after him, and Tony speeds up.

"Na Stark, this isn't a punishment. It's an attempt to make it easier for you to function effectively."

Tony whirls on him, puts his hands on Rowland's shoulders and shoves. "Get out of my goddamn personal space."

Rowland lets Tony push him backward, offering no resistance. "Do you understand my goal here?" Rowland asks.

"You want Captain fucking America to be A-OK." The light-headedness is getting worse. Tony takes a step backward and it's nearly a stumble.

"I also want you to be A-OK."

"You've got a fucked up way of showing it," Tony says. God, he hates them. All he wants to do is go home. Not Stark House, but *home*. Where he's safe.

"Na Stark, we do have other options. If you would prefer, there are ways to assure that your relationship with Captain Rogers is his primary partnership. Or, if you like, we can find you an alternate partner who would be monogamous with you. Our records did not indicate that monogamy was a priority for you, but if that's the case, we'll re-adjust."

Tony turns away. "I guess asking you to stay out of my private life isn't an option."

"No, it's not." Rowland is following him again. "I'm here to help you. I know you don't believe that right now, but I hope you'll trust me enough to give me a shot."

Tony whirls around again. "You are in my space. Fucking back off. I don't like alphas in my personal space."

Rowland holds up both hands and takes two careful steps back. "Better?"

"The best I'm going to get." Tony is fucking sick of all of them. "Now fuck off. I am going home. You want me for anything else, fucking send me an email."

Chapter End Notes

I promise not to leave everyone in suspense too long. The next chapter will be up tomorrow!

Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

Long chapter is long: sorry about that.

Drug glossary:
telazepam, a benzodiazepine designed for omega bodies. Similar to this world's xanax.

It's way early morning, and Steve's writing a report at the living room poker table. He's annoyed enough that he's making snide comments about the effectiveness of the on-the-ground defense forces. There was absolutely no need for SHIELD to call in Steve and Clint.

He's recommending re-training for every last agent whose butts they saved yesterday.

The elevator opens, and Steve looks up hopefully. It's probably just Clint coming for a late snack, but if Tony was dropped off on the roof after finishing the engine repairs, he might come down this way.

It is Tony, but--

"What happened?" Steve asks, dropping his pen.

Tony is freshly showered, in jeans, boots, and a black band tee shirt, but he looks *terrible*. Every last line of strain and fatigue is back--tenfold. His face is ashen, there's several bandages on his hands, and Steve can smell that weird metallic sick-off-sick odor that Tony gets when the half-heats are approaching.

"So, Steven, I hear your reckless flirtation with chastity has been endangering the world." Tony's voice is flat, calm, but it doesn't sound right at all. Like the calm is weirdly artificial, like Tony's seeing everything from miles away.

Steve feels a sudden wash of icy cold, then red hot fury. "Who told you that?" Steve asks, doing his best to keep his voice calmer than his emotions.

"Uh oh, did little Na Stark find out something he wasn't supposed to?"

Steve sets his jaw. "No, but I haven't told anyone since I spoke to the doctor yesterday afternoon."

"I guess our new handler doesn't count as--" Tony trails off, goes silent. "You didn't tell him."

"Of course I didn't tell him!" Steve is horrified. "I meant to talk to you about it, privately."

"After we'd topped off your reserves with a little sex." Tony sounds matter of fact, still calm.

"No!" Steve feels light headed. How could everything go so wrong so fast? "Tony, I would never--please, believe me. I would *never* use you like that. As if you were some kind of power boost--I need, I want, to talk to you about the doctor. It's important, but it had nothing to do with what we did on the couch. The lovemaking was just for us. I missed you, that's all."

Tony sits down and buries his head in his hands. He mutters something, but Steve can't make out the words.

"Let's go to the couch," Steve says softly. Maybe they can recapture their earlier togetherness and comfort.

They sit, but while Tony is close, he's as stiff as wire.

"I can't believe my therapist told them," Steve says. "I didn't tell them, so she must have." It hurts. All this time, he trusted Dr. Katz. She'd said she wouldn't tell command, and she'd lied. It's a betrayal he didn't expect--what else has she told?

"What? Hey, no," Tony says, sitting up straighter, obviously pulled out of a train of thought. "No, she wouldn't have. Trust me on this. They got it from someone else. A doctor at NYU."

"Oh." Not that it makes it much better. "It was supposed to be private."

"Your doctor didn't squeal either. I've been up late finding the hacking trail. As far as I can tell, one of the SHIELD tech guys hacked the NYU servers and did some digging. I guess your doctor called and requested some medical information from your records, and that tipped SHIELD off to the existence of your appointment. Gave them a place to look."

"Wonderful," Steve says. "Is there anything in my life that's private?"

Tony is looking a little less awful. "Nope. Sorry, cupcake."

"I didn't want you to find out like that."

"Yeah, well."

"I don't know what they told you." Steve braces his elbows on his knees. "What did Rowland say, exactly?"

"You're an E-9 alpha. You need to get laid way more often."

Steve can see the tension singing through every muscle of Tony's body, even under that weird false calm. "I'm not going to ask you to do anything with me that you're not ready to do."

Tony throws his hands in the air and stands. "I wish people would fucking quit deciding what I can and cannot do."

"I only meant--"

Tony whirls on him. "You think I can't handle fucking you, Rogers? You think you've got something so big in those pants of yours that I'm going to faint when I see it? You think I'm so fucking broken I can't bear a little daily dose of vanilla missionary fucking? Or are you actually into kinky shit? You want a threesome or moresome? You want me bound and gagged every morning before work, we can fucking do that."

"I think I may kill Rowland," Steve says calmly.

Tony's undoing his belt-buckle--preparatory to ripping his clothes off, no doubt. He stops. "What?"

"I'm not sure what he told you, except it must have been as insulting as possible. I think I may kill him. It won't fix our problem, but it'll do wonders for my mood."

Tony's staring blankly at him.

"It took Sa Richardson days to get my mate relaxed, and I was patient, I was happy to wait, and Rowland has one little conversation with you and sets back all that hard work. So I'm going to kill him." Before Sa Richardson does.

"You're going to kill Rowland."

"Yes, I think so." Steve feels quite calm about this plan. "It would have been perfectly legal under article 7, sub-section 22 of the Alpha Officer's Rules and Regulations Handbook. Back in my day. It might still be, in international waters. I'll just wait until the Helicarrier is over the sea. Do it then. I can toss the body overboard. That way there won't even be a mess."

"Uh, Steven. What the hell do you think the guy talked to me about?"

"I'm not sure, but he's convinced you that I'm unhappy with you. That's enough, as far as I'm concerned." Steve's going to do this. It's a good plan. SHIELD needs to get the message that his mate is off limits. If the only thing they'll listen to is losing agents, then Steve's prepared to take that step.

"He didn't say you were unhappy with me, exactly," Tony says hastily. "He just said you needed a lot more than I can give you."

"And you believed him." Steve hasn't been this angry in a long time. This is far worse than Ross. That general had just been a garden variety bully. Rowland hurt Tony's *heart*. Unacceptable.

"He seemed to think the evidence was on his side," Tony says. "Whoa, whoa, whoa--no, you are not going off to confront him. You stay right here, big guy."

Steve lets Tony drag him back down to the couch instead of toward the elevator, but Steve still needs to make himself clear. "I am not letting him interfere with us, Tony. He had no business going behind my back with you, saying those things to you."

"You just let me worry about Rowland--no, no, wait, I said *wait*." Tony shoves Steve back down onto the couch. "You wait right here."

Steve crosses his arms, but he waits. There is nothing Tony's going to say that will redeem that interfering little twerp, but if his mate wants to talk first, they can talk.

Tony sits down next to him on the couch. Much closer than usual, so they're touching. Steve shoots him a look--he's not going to be manipulated that easily.

"Tell me what the doctor said," Tony says. "The file I hacked at NYU was pretty sparse."

Steve tries to think. This is not how he wanted to talk to Tony about this. God, he's mad at them. Tony is so vulnerable--not about the sex, the way Rowland seems to think, but in Tony's heart. So few people think of Tony the person and love him for who he is.

"The doctor said," Steve says, trying to decide where to start, "Well, I guess I should back up."

"OK," Tony says, but he shoves over a little so that they're lined up, side to side, touching from knee to shoulder.

"I talked to Sa Richardson," Steve says. "At the park." Steve isn't sure he can talk about his pack again. Not now, when everything else is still so fresh. His anger makes thinking of his pack even more painful, salt in the raw wound.

Tony waits quietly.

Steve knows Tony is giving him time to gather his thoughts, but all the words are trapped inside. My pack is dead. I lost them all. I can't hear them anymore inside and it hurts, all the time. I'm missing ghosts. The ice kept half of me.

"Sa Richardson--he guessed something. About the past." That's as much as Steve can force out at first. This world, it's so different. It had felt so safe, talking to Sa Richardson, but now Steve doesn't know what to think. Was Sa Richardson's comfort a lie, too? "What did he tell you about our meeting?"

"He said you're a good man. Honorable. A strategic thinker. That you deserved more than the world handed you." Tony says the words matter of factly, the way he does when he's near-reciting something.

That's surprising, but it shouldn't be. Sa Richardson is very sweet, like Tony. "He didn't tell you what we talked about?"

"No." Tony lays a hand on Steve's shoulder, rubs it gently. Then he smiles, eyes crinkling a little, more natural. "He did mention that you're oomphier than he expected. More dominant."

Steve grimaces. Figures. It's not a compliment, not to those two clever beautiful omegas.

"Steven," Tony says, coaxing. "Alex wouldn't share a private conversation between the two of you. Was it a good talk that you two had?"

Steve relaxes a little. "It was. I have trouble talking, and he just pushed, and it was easier."

"I'm glad," Tony says and now he's sliding his arm around Steve's shoulders, drawing Steve against him. "Shh, Steven, I'm glad. You don't need to tell me what you two talked about. I know you got close, because I could smell you on him. In a nice way. I hoped you two got to know each other. He liked you. OK?"

Steve drops his head, exhausted. He doesn't understand any of this world's rules. "I don't know anymore."

"Well, I do." Tony sounds very certain. "So, you two got to talking. It was a good talk, but it got intense, right? Alex is easy to talk to--believe me, I know. Whatever it was, even now it's choking you up because it's still painful. So you decided to do the right thing and made an therapy appointment."

How did Tony know that? Oh, he mentioned Dr. Katz earlier. "Well, I did, but--"

"But nothing. That's what I told you to do. So you did the right thing."

Tony's still holding him against his chest, and Steve risks tucking his nose into his mate's shoulder. Soap, the faint magnolia from their laundry detergent, iron and skin. Safety. Home.

"So," Tony goes on, bringing his other arm around so Steve's enfolded in a Tony hug. "I'm guessing Dr. Katz sent you to NYU medical. Am I right?"

Steve nods against Tony's shirt. The band tee shirt is dark gray. They're almost always some form of black, but faded to charcoal from repeated washings. It's the only clothing in the modern world that Steve understands. In his day, worn out clothing was normal. Now, no one wears it except Tony or people who destroy the clothes to make them look that way on purpose.

"So tell me what the doctors recommended and what will happen if we don't follow the doctor's orders."

That doesn't sound so bad. Then Steve remembers Dr. Santos's recommendation about taking Tony to a priest to explain about needing a second wife.

"Hey," Tony pokes him in the shoulder. "None of that. I'm a mechanic and a genius. I am excellent at fixing shit. I'll fix it. And if we can't fix it, we'll tell Natasha what it is and she can brutally murder it with her bare thighs."

Steve laughs, but it's kind of strained.

"Better," Tony says softly. "Rowland let slip that you're an E-9. Is that true?"

"I guess so. That's what Dr. Santos said."

"Jesus Christ. Of course you are."

Steve pulls back, feeling bleary. "Is it so bad? Being an E-9?"

"It's not *bad*, Rogers. It's pretty cool. It's just tricky. It means you're good at getting people to pitch in and help. Even strangers or people who don't get along."

"Dr. Santos said that a lot of Es go into teaching."

"See?" Tony said, voice gentle again. "Teaching is a good field. Worthwhile work. Now, what did she say about your para-sexual system?"

Ouch. What had that jerk Rowland told Tony? "It's depleted."

Tony's arms tighten around him, hard. "Completely?"

"I don't know. Pretty bad, I guess. The doctor didn't give me a number, but the gel turned purple instead of light blue."

"I'll find out what that means. What did she recommend?"

Steve can't make himself say it.

"Steven." Tony's arms are tight around him, holding him close, but Steve can smell the hot-forge scent shimmering with fear and worry and more of the unwell scent.

"Touch," Steve says at last. "And orgasms. She says I could get a Compassionate Care Companion." He doesn't add three or four of them, because one would be enough. Surely. "Um, and spending time with the team. And, well, getting a second or third spouse."

"On a scale of one to ten, how freaked out are you about this?"

"Twelve," Steve mutters.

"OK." Tony pulls back a little, ducks down to see Steve's eyes. "How about this right now--does it feel good?"

Steve sighs. "You know it does."

"There's no reason we can't do this every day."

Right. Steve takes a deep breath and pulls away. "You took something before you came down here."

"Excuse me?"

"Some kind of medicine." Steve meets his eyes. "I can smell it. It must have taken a little while to take effect, but-"

Tony moves so fast he's off the couch and across the room before Steve can finish talking. His face has gone ashy gray again, and his hands are trembling so badly that Steve can see the shakes.

"I have a prescription," Tony says, and his breathing is jagged now, too.

Steve holds his hands up, nice and slow. "I assumed you did. But you can't take medicine just so that you can sit near me."

"I didn't take it because of you!"

"Then why did you take it?" Steve's going to circle around this, because sometimes you have to, with Tony.

"It's not--" Tony barks out a laugh. "God, my life. Fucked up. Every single piece of it. I completely fuck it up. Or it gets fucked up. I can't even tell anymore."

"Tony," Steve says, "what medication did you take? Why did you take it?"

Even from here, Steve can smell the wash of shame, slick and dark, like oil-slick smearing the clear iron ore earth. "I had a panic attack, OK? I'm allowed to take my goddamn medication when I have a panic attack. Hell, I'm supposed to take it. I told Jarvis not to let me in the suits, and SHIELD just got done with us, so I thought I could risk it."

"What kind of medication is it?"

"It's telazepam. It's a benzodiazepine designed for omegas." Tony sits down in his usual chair, miles away from Steve. He runs his hands through his hair, then stares at Steve through his fingers. "It's fucking anxiety medication, OK? Because I am one fucked up bitch."

"What Rowland said really upset you," Steve says. Even more than he'd thought.

"Jesus, could you *please* not go on a rampage tonight?" Tony's shoulders slump. He sounds desperate and exhausted. "I'll stop you, I will, but can't we schedule Rowland's slaughter for tomorrow?"

"If I promise not to retaliate in any way against Rowland, will you tell me what happened?"

Tony throws himself back in the chair and throws his arm over his eyes. "Fuck. Yeah, why not. But you can't hurt him. Not for any of it. We're in enough trouble already and my little diva fit with him didn't help matters."

Steve bites his lip. Whatever happened on the Helicarrier, it wasn't Tony being a diva. Tony can play at melodrama, but this is nothing like Tony getting bitchy over subpar bagels in the SHIELD cafeteria. Tony's upset. Afraid, shaken, shy. Hurt. "I promise."

Tony digs in the pocket of his jeans and throws a small pill box on the coffee table. "Rowland viewed the footage of us on the hangar bay."

Steve picks up the pill box. It's cloisonné, very pretty, but not Tony's own work. Inside are four small green oval shaped pills. This must be the telazepam.

"The asshole was so *nice* about it. I'm so sorry, Na Stark, I know you have very serious triggers regarding being photographed in sexual situations against your will, but I had to view the footage."

Steve looks up, but Tony's still got his arm over his eyes. To be fair to Rowland, Steve hadn't even thought about that.

"In my professional capacity as your handler," Tony says, "I need to ask you what went on between you and Captain Rogers in his bedroom. You left looking distressed."

Steve turns the pill box around and around in his hand. His hands are huge compared to Tony's, and they make the box appear tiny. "He asked me about that, too."

"Well obviously," Tony drawls, sitting up. "Of course he had to speak to you first. He wanted to know how I felt, but he couldn't possibly talk to me unless he'd spoken to you first. Gotten your *permission*. Wouldn't want to tip Captain America into Fight." Tony shakes himself. "Christ, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, it's fine." Steve can tell Tony's quoting Rowland's own words, or part of them.

"But you want to know the worst?"

Steve sets the pill box down on the coffee table. "What was the worst?"

"God, now I don't even want to talk about it." Tony folds forward, burying his face in his hands again. "He also said shit like, since I'm a sexual assault survivor, it would be grossly irresponsible for him to ask me to have increased sexual relations with you. But hey, what sort of omegas do I like to fuck, because he's gonna have a bundle of 'em background checked and sent on over to keep you company."

Steve picks up the pill box again, turns it over and over again. Whose work is it? The colors are brilliant and the pattern is of crisply defined flowers and bright leaves and a single dragonfly. It's wonderfully well made, because Tony can afford the best. This feels personal, though. A memento. There is so much of Tony's life that Steve knows nothing about.

"And then he's talking about my *morphology*."

Steve looks up sharply, but Tony's still staring at the floor through his hands. "Agent Rowland asked about your morphology?"

"Yeah. He's all, Na Stark, your morphology is a full extreme with a preferred masculine presentation, isn't that right?" Tony sneers the words in a fake respectful tone. "You're a Roanoke, is that correct? Blah blah blah. God. I haven't seen those words in years."

It's the phrasing used on marriage contracts and in marriage agency forms. "Why did he want to know?"

Tony laughs bitterly. "SHIELD's stealing a page from Alex's own playbook and making sure the Os they find for you meet my type too. I guess in case I want to join in the party. Or maybe they're just hoping not to piss you off. Or maybe the pool of Os who want to fuck Captain fucking America is so big they have to whittle it down somehow."

The words are tumbling out like they've been bottled inside for hours. They probably have been.

"And he's talking about my Klennecky Scale and do I have a gender preference and of course it matters what I like, since these people will be in my home. As if this is even my fucking home. Christ."

Steve wants to shake Rowland until his teeth rattle in his head. That *idiot*.

"You know what else they offered?" Tony demands, finally looking up.

"No," Steve says, because it's the truth. No matter what he can imagine, Tony will tell him something worse.

"See, they didn't realize monogamy was important to me. But Na Stark, if it is important, hey, they'll get me a partner who will be faithful and focus on me. Because obviously who I fuck is completely interchangeable. Although God knows, it's the truth. Who I fuck *is* interchangeable."

"Tony," Steve says.

"What? I know it drives you crazy. It drives Alex crazy. It drives SHIELD crazy. It drives everyone crazy. I can't keep it in my pants, and if I do keep it in my pants, it's just because somebody's using my mouth instead."

"*Tony*." Steve's going to stop this, right now.

Tony looks up, and his eyes look wild. "What? I can't even say what I'm thinking anymore?"

"I don't like to hear you talk down about yourself, that's all. Agent Rowland shouldn't have said those things."

"Oh, but you see, Agent Rowland has experience in dealing with omegas like me. Oh yes indeed. He's had *training*. That's the whole fucking problem. That was the fucking worst thing. He was nice about it. He was nice about every fucking thing. Nice about telling me he was getting my boyfriend some new fuckbuddies because I can't handle it."

"Tony, Agent Rowland doesn't get to decide who I sleep with."

"Yeah, but see--"

"No," Steve says firmly. "The only person who decides who I get to sleep with is me. And you."

"You're an E-9. If we don't get you laid, the entire--"

"*Tony*." Steve keeps his voice calm, but he projects it loud enough to fill the room. "Look at me."

Tony looks up, but he's glaring. That's good--Steve would much rather Tony be angry than hurt.

"Dr. Santos gave me some other options, and Dr. Katz also said I don't have to follow Dr. Santos to the letter. I'm not going to sleep with some random omega that SHIELD sends over. It's not going to happen."

"If the fate of the world--"

Steve pulls the Kashmir from his pocket. "We have six doses. That will buy us some time. I'm not risking you to make Agent Rowland happy."

"Oh." Tony is staring at the little lipstick vial like he's forgotten it existed.

"Especially given what happened with Ross and Bogota, do you really think I would sleep with someone that SHIELD picked?"

"I guess not," Tony says. "You know, if you needed it, you could have just told me."

"Tony," Steve clings to his patience. "I don't want to use you. How many times do I have to say it before you believe me?"

"No, I mean, I know that. I still think we're going way too slow, but I'm not even talking about that." Tony gets up from his chair and stomps over, plopping down next to him. He pokes Steve in the bicep. "You think I couldn't hook you up with some hot sexy O action?"

"I would prefer not to pay people for sex," Steve says.

Tony rolls his eyes. "I'm shocked, Steven, shocked. Like I couldn't have guessed that one. I can find you a bunch of pretty, willing, skilled volunteers to squirm around on the ole pogo stick."

"There's a nice image," Steve says. "But before we get sidetracked, I want you to know that I was going to ask for your help. SHIELD just got to you before I could talk to you about this."

"Yeah, you said," Tony says, but there's still that edge of uncertainty under the words. Steve thinks that's fair after what Tony's gone through, but it's still frustrating.

"Dr Katz also told me that I don't have to do what Dr Santos recommended. Not immediately. Ease into things, she said. Take small steps. I haven't followed up with her yet, but I have an appointment Monday."

"Here's the thing, Steven." Tony rolls his fingers against his knee in a quick tattoo. It's one of the tells for when Tony's deep in thought about a mechanical problem. "I'm not sure your doctor was right."

"What?" Of all the things that Tony might say, this isn't on Steve's list.

"I don't think you'll do better with lots of orgasms," Tony says. He leans forward, and he's frowning. "In fact....I think a lot of orgasms would backfire."

"But she said I'm depleted, and the research says that my type has a higher sex drive than other alphas even. I'm not trying to be difficult, but she did say I needed orgasms."

"I'm sure she did. I just think she's wrong. Well, kind of wrong." Tony keeps tapping his fingers rhythmically. "Look, Steven, you're a hardliner, no question, but what you need is closeness. Belonging. I've had a lot more sex than most people. If you fuck someone just to fuck, you're going to feel empty. Alone. Like there's a hollowness where your heart should be."

Steve looks down at the floor, clasping his hands together. He'd had a few sweaty moments stolen during the war with a willing stranger that, when it was over...

"Yeah, see?" Tony reaches out to grab his hand. "But I also think that you're easier to make happy than those twits in medical realize."

Steve sighs. He doesn't think so. Dr Santos had seemed so sure.

"Look, I need to ask you something. Steven, look at me."

Steve looks up. There's something about Tony's firm sure voice that soothes something inside. His mate has every right to decide how to handle this. It's a comfort.

Tony smiles, wry but warm. "Steven, did you snuggle with Alex?"

Steve has no idea what to say. Had what they done counted as snuggling?

"If you did, it's OK. I could smell you all over him, so I know you two got pretty close. I'm not mad, gorgeous, I just need to know."

"I--" Steve feels the blush spreading down his neck. Oh God. "I was upset and he sat in my lap. It was..." So comforting. But Tony is his mate. He has a right to know everything. "I do like him. That way."

Tony grabs Steve's clasped-together hands. "Hey, it's OK. I'm glad you two had a good talk together. Alex is really easy to talk to. Steven, I'm not asking this to get you in trouble. I'm trying to find out if snuggling Alex helped."

"What?" Steve doesn't get it at first. "Of course it helped. I was upset, but having him there, warm and solid, listening and... Wait. You think it *helped*?"

"I think it helped," Tony says. His eyes are dancing with the kind of curiosity he usually gets in the lab.

"Because he was so close, I guess. He was really nice, Tony. I'm glad you're friends with him." Steve hadn't had a chance to say that yet, but it's true.

"It wasn't the physical closeness, babe. You didn't get a charge out of hanging out with the Os at the Governor's Mansion party a couple weeks ago. Or having lunch with the New Jersey backup team and their dates."

That had been different. Both times, people had ended up in Steve's lap because there weren't enough seats. He'd been plastered with pretty omegas, yes, but it had just been kind of uncomfortable. "It's not the same."

"My point exactly." Tony's smiling like he's made a breakthrough discovery. "You need emotional closeness to go with the physical touch."

Steve ducks his head.

"Hey, hey, no. This is great. This is going to make everything a lot easier, gorgeous." Tony grabs Steve's hands and tugs him into a hug.

Steve goes, feeling unsure but also a tiny spark of hope. "Do you think so?"

"I know so. We have to get your instincts under control, but we're gonna do it in a way that makes you happy." Tony wraps his arms around Steve and holds on tight. "You leave this to me. I know exactly what to do, baby."

"You do?"

"I do." Tony tugs him even closer. "You don't need sex. I mean you do, but we can work on that long-term, the way you like. What you need right now is to be touched. I'm gonna set up some cuddling sessions."

"Tony, I just don't know." Steve still isn't sure Tony won't spring a bunch of paid professionals on him. "I don't like to be touched by strangers. If you're calling those compassion people..."

"I won't call them. I'm going to call Honey--wait, wait, don't freak on me. She's a good friend. You two get along real well, and you're a lot alike. Strangely optimistic about people. She's got a momma streak a mile wide and she's been a pro for years. Part of hooking is dealing with guys who've been touch-starved, including soldiers back from war. Like Clint was after Loki, right?"

"She's very beautiful but I don't want to have sex with her."

"You're not having sex with her. You're gonna sit together on the couch, wrapped up close, and snuggle. And whatever happens, no matter how you end up feeling, I'm telling you that she can handle you, just as good as I can. There's nothing you can throw at Honey that she can't handle. She's safe, OK?"

"You think I'm going to flip into Fight."

"No," Tony says, and he looks gentle, kind. "But I think you might cry. You're from a generation where that was--hey, no, don't pull away. It's OK. Honey's seen it all. You won't scare her or upset her."

Steve knows Tony's probably right. Honey does have that air that the hard working Os in the whorehouse had. "OK, Tony, but the doctor said--" Orgasms.

"We'll get to that. But I want you to have as much touch as possible. Honey isn't official team, but she's good as family to me. I don't have any blood relatives left, and I've been helping raise Riv for years. I want you to at least give this a try."

That makes sense. No wonder Honey is over for Sunday breakfast so often. Steve still wants to see Tony and Riv together, because there's something about Tony and kids that just makes Steve happy. Also, Steve likes the way the Honey and Tony bicker, comfortable and homey--Honey thinks Tony gets kind of peaky if he doesn't have interesting things to repair, and Tony always claims to be too overworked to deal with the bizarre things Honey finds. Tony is overworked, of course, but Honey is right--without new mechanical toys to play with, Tony gets depressed. After a token protest, Tony always agrees to fix it, and he's spent many a lunch happily regaling Steve with strange tales of engines gone awry--one riding lawnmower Honey found had a mouse nest in the engine block.

"OK," Steve says. "I'll give it a try."

"Good. Now, the sex part--" Tony gnaws his lip. "There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about anyway."

"Oh?" Steve asks warily. He has a fleeting hope it's about Tony cutting back on the extra-curricular activities, but that can't be it.

"I asked Alex to come visit. Starting week after next, not just for a couple nights, but, in general." Tony says it in a rush. Steve has to think through it for a moment.

"That was a very kind thought," Steve says. It's just like Tony, too.

But Tony is giving Steve the most surprised look that Steve's seen on his face, well, ever.

"Kind? He's not a--" Tony stops himself, pulls back, stares at Steve with a fierce expression.

Damn. Steve phrased himself wrong. "I don't mean as a help for my problem, but because of his husband moving to Washington state. I thought you were inviting him here so he'd be with you. He said he was happy about Sa Delano going to college, but it's a big change. He's bound to be lonely. I just think it's kind of you to make sure Sa Richardson is with friends."

"Oh," Tony says, brows furrowed. "I--no. Well. Fuck."

"He's been very helpful with the work we've been doing," Steve says, trying the other obvious reason. "Natasha was very impressed by that report he dropped off the other day."

"This isn't going right," Tony says. "Fucking hell, I should have known. Look. I need to ask you an honest question, OK? Don't worry about right answers, just answer honestly."

"OK," Steve says, confused.

"You do--" Tony stops, frowns again. He pulls his legs up so he's sitting cross-legged. "Do you remember some of the academic articles about marriages among the higher alpha-types?"

Steve nods slowly. That question does not in any way require supreme honesty. He read the few in Tony's stack ages ago, but he's also read more from Dr Katz. And now Dr Santos. He's getting a bad feeling about this. "Tony, what are you up to?"

"It's not--I'm not up to something, Steven."

"Are you asking me to promise not to flirt with him when he stays here?" Steve had enjoyed Sa Richardson's company very much during the times he's met him, and the photo flirting had been pretty fun.

If Sa Richardson is still a virgin, though, there's a reason. Steve's an honorable man. He won't trespass where he's not wanted. Tony should be able to have his dear friend over without worrying Steve will make him uncomfortable, especially now.

Tony scrubs at his face with his hands. "God, I am so bad at this. I should have let Alex do it. He offered."

"Maybe you should just say it straight," Steve says. Tony's brain sometimes imagines so many possibilities and side-routes for a conversation that things get lost.

"Alex is going to sleep with me," Tony says. He's watching Steve carefully.

Steve keeps his expression carefully neutral. "In my day, that would be understood. It's not a problem for me, Tony."

"What about...us?" Tony asks, waving a hand between them.

"I hope you'll still go on dates with me on Friday nights and out to lunch, when we can," Steve says. "I'm going to kiss you goodnight, just like always. I'm going to eat in your kitchen on Sunday. I'm going to sit with you in here while you fix things, and sometimes I'll read from my book."

"Steven, how would it have worked in your day, for Alex to stay with me?"

Interesting--maybe this is going the direction Steve hoped. "He's your friend. It wasn't unusual for omegas to have special friends back then. Travel was more expensive, so he'd have probably come for a couple of months instead of a few nights a week." Steve decides to be honest just to see Tony's expression. "I'd stay in a smaller room, because you two would want the bigger bed."

Tony's eyebrow goes up, but he doesn't deny it.

"Alex isn't married, which would be unusual for my day. It'd be more likely for him to have a kid or two, be on a break from contracts, or have his own permanent marriage, and honestly..." Today is just so different. "It's more likely he'd stay here for his confinement, or you'd stay with him for yours. I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have said that last part."

"No," Tony's eyes are dark with something Steve's never seen before. "No, you're fine. Look. Back in your time--did these friends ever, you know, permanently move around together?"

"What are you asking me, Tony?"

"Did people arrange joint marriages?" Tony says, almost hissing the words and looking around to make sure nobody is listening. As if anyone would be--it's the morning and everyone else has left.

"Yes of course," Steve says slowly. "An alpha had to have more money or some cache. Two omegas, instead of just one, that took some cash. Most guys who wanted two people in bed got a beta girl and an omega. But if an alpha was well set up, sometimes he'd court two together and marry them like that."

Tony is still looking directly at him.

Steve keeps remembering Dr Santos's words. He also knows from his readings this evening that two or three omega marriages are quite common with the higher alpha types, and that in some cultures, omegas are paired by default.

When he was growing up, Steve hadn't known too many unmarried omegas, especially to ask them about such things. But once his body changed, Steve met a lot more of them. 'We're a package deal' one omega had told Steve on his tour, as she clutched the arm of another omega. Both had smiled brilliantly at him.

All of this is making him wonder whether the naughty photo flirting had a different meaning than Steve had taken it for.

"Tony, are you saying...?" Steve asks, trying for delicacy. "Do you--prefer being with Sa Richardson in bed, when you're taken?"

Tony ducks away and back, but the smell of his arousal is so strong that Steve follows him, rapt. Tony flirts like he's breathing, but much of the time the arousal isn't this genuine.

"I've never," Tony says, looking down.

Steve can smell Tony's scent, shining in the air between them, the hot iron forge smell and the deep layer of sunwarmed granite. The sex smell of it is almost searing Steve's nose. It has a different note to it, and Steve inhales, air-scenting.

He thinks of what the articles had said, thinks of Dr Katz's words, thinks of what the madame in the French whorehouse had told him, all those years ago.

"You've never," Steve repeats softly, "but you'd *like* to?"

Tony raises his head, and Steve can see the way Tony's pupils are dilated, his face a little flushed. He definitely would like to. Steve thinks of the last photo of Tony and Sa Richardson curled together, and wonders if it was Tony's idea of a tease.

"Steven, this time, what I want can't be the deciding factor," Tony says.

"Tony, what you want is *never* the deciding factor," Steve says gently. Because, sure as anything in this world, that is the truth. Tony's *never* gotten what he wants just because he wants it.

Tony reaches out and toys with the sleeve of Steve's tee shirt, then drops his hand.

Steve holds completely still. His mate has never just asked for his comfort before, not with touch. Steve touches the back of Tony's hand, a simple caress, and that seems to be enough.

Tony sighs and leans in closer. "Alex has spent most of his life trying to give me what I want."

"He loves you," Steve says, certain of it.

Tony looks at him, mouth twisted. "He loves me. Do you know how we met? Became friends?"

"I know you two went to school together. That's what you said at the party when I met him. I've seen some pictures from back then. The exploding cake."

Tony ducks his head, laughs. "Yeah. The exploding volcano frosting. I hear they never did get some of that off the ceiling. Um. Would you--like to know?"

Steve brushes his knuckles against the back of Tony's hand again. "Yes."

"My parents sent me to school when I was eight. One night, mom tucked me into bed like usual, and the next morning, they stuffed me in the car and off I went." Tony looks around the living room. "Dad was pretty happy about it, you could tell. They--"

Tony's face looks pinched, but he blows out a breath. Steve just waits.

"They never explained. Why they sent me. Whether I'd ever get to come home. What I'd done wrong to make them dump me. I, you know, didn't take it as well as I should have."

Good grief. Steve wishes desperately he could go back in time and sock Howard in the jaw. "What did they tell you?"

"Steven honey, they didn't tell me *anything* except that they were sending me to school. Be a good boy, mom said. I expect nothing but positive report cards, Dad said. Mom kissed me on the cheek. That was it." Tony shakes his head. "I did kind of OK during the day. I mean, the school, they were used to kids like me. They know how to handle it."

That's one of the saddest things Steve's ever hear. The school knew how to handle children who'd been abandoned by their parents.

"But at night--" Tony flops back against the couch away from Steve.

Steve lets him go, watches Tony curl his knees into his chest. "You had nightmares?"

"They were a little more hardcore than just the average nightmare. Night terrors, they're called, sometimes. I'd wake up half my floor, screaming bloody murder, and sometimes it was hard to shake me awake."

"What did they do?"

"Oh, you know. Na Anderson was my floor mom. She put in nightlights, she showed me articles about age-related sleep trouble, she got the other kids ear-plugs, she taught me relaxation exercises, she'd make me hot cocoa or tea before bed, she set aside time each day just for the two of us--didn't figure out that one until I was older, but it was kinda nice, at the time, to just work in her lab together. They never tried drugging me or anything, but it was getting to be kind of a serious problem. I was having trouble concentrating, got really obnoxious, bratty."

Steve has dealt with Tony on a sleep-deprivation jag. "Mm."

"So, Alex. He was kind of a charmer. Just really sweet, you know? You couldn't help but trust him. Even feral little Tony Stark liked Alex Richardson."

Steve's not so sure Tony was feral so much as bleeding internally. "You two became friends."

"Eventually. Alex's parents sent him to Miss Price because his old school thought he was slow. That he'd never learn to read, that he was, you know, not smart enough." Tony shrugs. "Whatever they're calling it these days."

Steve has no idea either. "But he wasn't slow."

"No, his old school was just full of idiots. They didn't like Alex because--it doesn't matter. He'll have to tell you himself about that. When I met him he'd only just learned to read. Miss Price got him special tutors and that's what Alex worked on in the mornings. Just reading and basic math, because he was behind."

Steve has no idea what this has to do with night terrors, but he thinks maybe it's more that Alex had a shared experience of being a disappointment. "Tell me how you two got to be friends."

"One night, right before lights out, Alex shows up at my door. He's wearing his best dinosaur pajamas and he's got this big fluffy blanket and a book." Tony buries his nose on his knees, but he's smiling. "I liked Alex, but I wasn't very impressed with him."

Ouch. Steve can see it very clearly. Tony would have been reading long before, and he probably had special tutors to keep him occupied.

"But Alex just gives me this serious look and says he thinks he's figured out why I can't sleep at night."

"He had?"

"Yup. He says it's because no one's reading me a story before bed. Of course I had nightmares--" Tony trails off. He looks lost in memory, then he shakes himself. "So Alex

climbs up next to me on the bed and he's got this battered copy of *Where the Wild Things Are*. He read it to me. Well, I say 'read', but he had that sucker memorized. It was more that he recited it for me and turned the pages."

"Did it work?" Steve asks, curious.

Tony sighs. "That night, but not the next. I thought Alex was going to be pissed. He wasn't though. He said it was just a hypothesis and that it hadn't been thoroughly tested yet. I about fell off my chair. Here's this kid who just learned to read *Good Night Moon* and he's yammering on about hypothesis testing. That was Miss Price for you, though."

Steve's not sure what that means. "What happened next?"

"He kept asking me about different criteria, and he got me to admit that my mom used to read to me." Tony lays his cheek against his knee. Steve's never seen him look so sad, and the melancholy scent coming off him makes Steve want to enfold him in his arms.

"That night," Tony says quietly, "Alex showed up with a copy of the *Jungle Book*. It was the book she'd been reading me. I don't know where he got it, because he only had these easy reader picture books in his room. He snuggles right under the covers next to me and starts in on the chapter where my mom left off."

Steve's stomach hurts, imagining it. "I thought you said he could barely read."

"Yup. It was fucking painful, let me tell you what. He had to sound out half the words, and I kind of wanted to smack him. But nobody'd ever just done that kind of thing for me."

"You let him finish the story?"

"Took about an hour, but yeah, I let him finish it." Tony snorts. "He shut the book, looking very satisfied. Then he climbed out of bed and trotted to the door. He was wearing footy pajamas, but he looked determined as hell."

Steve can kind of picture it, actually. "I'm sure he carried the footy pajamas off with élan."

Tony laughs. "Yes. I thought that was it, but nope. Alex shows up the next night, and the next."

"Did he read you the whole book?"

"He did." Tony rubs his goatee against his knee and looks at Steve. "Have you read it? The Jungle Book?"

"No, but I know some of the stories. The Commandos would swap stories when we were stuck in the rain, on patrol, back at base, waiting."

Tony looks distant for a long moment. "The next time I had a nightmare, Alex came. He woke me up and then--" Tony shakes his head. "I was eight, OK? Alex helped me look under the bed and in the closets. He brought his flashlight and a big screwdriver for a weapon, in case we found something."

Steve smiles. He can't help it. "Did you find anything?"

"Not even a dust bunny." Tony flops back against the couch. "But that's the night I decided he was a mongoose. His hair was all sticking up and he'd just crawled right under the bed, completely fearless, with the screwdriver in his right hand and that flashlight clamped between his teeth. Looking under my bed like he's searching for stray cobras."

"I'm glad he was there." It was cruel, what Howard and Maria did. Stupidly, needlessly cruel. Steve knew kids who had to be sent away to stay with other relatives--lack of money, no room, a sick parent, another sick child. It was still hard, but it was necessary. To be sent away without ever knowing why, to be all alone, so young. Yes, Steve's glad Tony had Alex.

"Me too." Tony frowns at his socked feet, wriggles his toes. "So, here's the thing."

Steve just waits, curious.

"Alex has always sort of just fixed things for me." Tony wiggles his toes some more. "We were best friends, and if I got my plane stuck in a tree, he'd climb up to get it. Even if it was too high. You know?"

Steve thinks of Bucky. "I know."

"I haven't always been as good to Alex as Alex has been to me." Tony's voice is strained. "We were--lovers, before I got married. I wasn't--I wasn't very sane, for a while there. I'm still not."

"Tony, it's OK," Steve says. Tony smells of fear and shame and a deep wistfulness. "It's OK."

Tony buries his face against his knees. "It's really not. But I can't help it. What I'm trying to say is, I fucked up. Kind of big time."

"With Alex?"

"Yeah." Tony looks at him, and Steve wants to wrap Tony close and just hold on. "See, we were lovers before. After, I was just too fucked up. I mean, I used to hide in the smallest places I could find. Slept in an attic or the workshop bunker. Built myself knives out of glass. Designed poisons. I just went completely off my rocker."

"Do you think he's still upset about that?"

"No." Tony shuts his eyes. "He was never upset about that. Not at me. But it--broke something, inside me. I couldn't let it mean anything anymore. Not any of it."

"I'm sorry, Tony. I don't understand what you're getting at." Slowly, Steve reaches out, careful to withdraw his hand if Tony moves away at all.

Tony blinks at the hand, leans toward it. Steve strokes his hair, rubs his shoulder, and then Tony's burying his face against Steve's shoulder.

"Shhh," Steve says, hauling Tony into his lap. "Shh, it's OK."

Tony curls in, and Steve just holds him for a while. At last, Tony says, "I didn't sleep with him for a couple years afterward. I think he was waiting for me, but when I came to the city one time, I just--fucked this girl I met at a party. It didn't mean anything to me. None of them did."

Steve strokes his fingers through Tony's messy curls. "So, he was hurt?"

"God, probably. Hell, definitely. I just--after that, I just slept with people. I still do. That's not the problem, though. Alex never assumed I'd be just his. I mean, that wasn't going to happen, not with our lives."

Steve hasn't thought of it that way, but it's got to be true. Two omegas wouldn't just get to be together in their social class. Or Steve's. Not unless they married an alpha together. "So what was the problem?"

"I told him he didn't matter."

"You told him he didn't matter," Steve says, repeating the words slowly in a kind of dawning horror. "That's not hyperbole is it?"

"No." Tony buries his face against Steve's shoulder. "I slept with him, I kept asking him to be with me, then if he was happy at all, I'd kind of freak out and tell him he wasn't real. That it didn't mean anything."

"*Tony*. Why would you do that?"

"I keep telling you, I'm crazy. No one believes me. Maybe you'll finally get it now."

"Being crazy is hiding under a workbench. Being a jerk is telling someone who loves you that they don't matter."

"Yeah, take his side," Tony says.

"I'm not taking *sides*," Steve says, holding him tighter. "So what were you thinking?"

"I hate it when you go all reasonable." Tony sighs and goes on before Steve can argue. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. Something just--broke, inside me. I didn't want any of it to matter. If it mattered, it would mean something, and I just couldn't bear it."

"But you couldn't give him up, either."

"Yeah." Tony sighs into Steve's shirt. "Look, you know I like you, right?"

"Yes, Tony," Steve says gently. "I know you like me."

"Good. That's good."

Tony doesn't say anything else for a while, and Steve kind of wants to shake him because it's so hard to tell what's going on in his head sometimes.

"Tony," Steve says at last. He doesn't want to push, but whatever Tony is thinking--they need to talk about it.

"Right. Um." Tony sits back, and Steve can see his eyes are a little red. "So, uh, I was raised to believe, by my parents, that I was going to get married. OK?"

"OK," Steve says. This is dangerous territory. Steve can feel the ice spreading around them, slick and black.

"But I grew up with other omegas, and I--" Tony gnaws at his lower lip until it turns white. "I like them."

Steve rubs Tony's back, gentle soothing circles. "When we talked, a while ago, about the books on modern gender and sexual preferences, you said--"

"I know what I said," Tony says quickly. He's looking down and the sharp scent of shame is ugly on the air.

Steve keeps rubbing Tony's back. Tony isn't shying away from that touch, and Steve thinks he might like the contact. "You looked really beautiful when you went dancing with Honey."

Tony frowns against him. "That's--I didn't think you'd think about it as anything but, you know."

Steve ignores whatever weird social more Tony's talking about now. "I've had Sunday breakfast with Honey. She's a person, and I thought you were beautiful together. You had fun dancing with her, unlike the way you smell with a lot of your other dates."

"We didn't actually have sex."

"Yes, you did, you just left your clothes on. Maybe you didn't come from your dick, but you still has sex. I know exactly what my nose told me, and you were both wet."

Tony pulls back. "Jesus Christ, Rogers. Thanks for sharing that fun fact with the class."

"I'm saying that you had an enjoyable sexy evening. Which is more than you had with the alphas I watched you actually fuck."

"They came," Tony says. He sounds defensive.

"I really don't care about them," Steve says drily. "Tony, I'm not sure how this relates to your parents. But if you're saying that your marital preference is for male alphas, then that's OK."

"My marital preference," Tony says slowly, like the words are new. "I meant that I was going to marry. An alpha, or a couple. Actually, my mom thought I should sort of discretely shop around. But I figured I'd be--marital preference. *Marital* preference."

Steve can hear the wheels turning a mile a minute, and he wants to get this straightened out before Tony's mind wanders away. "Do you remember the book The Many Practices of Love?"

"Is that the long quiz?" Tony asks warily. "Because I hate that shit. Seriously, seriously hate it. I've had way more sex than anyone else, and they always just label me 'slut'. Which is fine, it's true, and it's fair, and all that, but--"

"No, there was no quiz." Steve can tell this discussion is going to get out of hand if he's not careful. "It had an interesting set of questions to think about. I liked it."

"What kind of questions?" Tony asks, eyes narrowed speculatively. "Wait--did you change your answer from what we talked about? Because I've thought of a couple things you might really enjoy, if you got the chance."

"I'll tell you a few new things I thought of, if you'll tell me the answer to a couple of my questions."

Tony nearly pounces. "Yes."

Steve's surprised, but Tony has always loved a dare. He's also more curious than a cat. "Do you find sex with a compatible omega relaxing?"

Tony stares at him. "*That's* your first question?"

"That's my first question."

"What kind of question is that? Do I find sex with a compatible omega relaxing. Jesus Christ, sex isn't supposed to be relaxing. It's not a day at the damn beach. It's sex."

Steve shrugs. "I didn't ask if it was supposed to be. I just asked if it was. With a compatible omega. For you. People have different kinds of sex for different reasons."

Tony crosses his arms, and he looks offended. Steve doesn't mind that, though. He's pretty sure he's asked the right question. "Fine," Tony says. "OK, you know what? Fine. It's *relaxing*. That's why I like the damn orgies. I do it to fucking unwind after a crappy day. Happy now?"

Steve finds that a little over the top, but pretty typical Tony. "Very. My other question is this--"

"Nope. I answered a question, now you gotta tell me what your sex-crazed brain cooked up." Tony gestures impatiently.

"I don't think it's sex-crazed," Steve says calmly. "I find ferocity and cleverness very attractive."

"That's it?" Tony asks, baffled. "You find ferocity and cleverness attractive? That's your earth-shaking insight?"

"The first one, yes." Steve moves Tony more comfortably on his lap, settling him in. Tony's still making outraged little huffy noises, which is pretty cute. "Up until now, I just assumed I found submissive omegas attractive."

Tony goes still. "But--you do still like that, right?"

"Very much," Steve says firmly. "I love the way you are in bed, Tony. Nothing is going to change that."

"I hate to keep harping this teeny tiny little point, but you are a major cock tease. I've only ever managed to make it to the *bed* once with you, and we didn't even do anything interesting."

Just as well, since Tony had blacked it all out. Still, Tony's endless whining that they always go too slow is cheering. "Because when we get there it's going to mean something. But before, I just assumed I found you attractive because you're submissive. In the Commandos, I liked going to bed with Ezra the most, even though he had that thing with Hank. He was submissive--a bit like you, with your neck, except his spot was on his hip."

"He was submissive," Tony says slowly. There's something going on in Tony's eyes--thoughts whirling and dancing in the depths.

"Yeah, he was. I did all the exercises in the book, and I've been working with my therapist. It helped me realize that I kept thinking things like being so proud you were so clever to invent a strategy on the fly when we were stuck in that bog or being impressed when you blew up that concrete wall with that fertilizer."

"Any engineer worth his salt can blow up a wall with some fertilizer and the tools I keep in the suit," Tony says, but he sounds pleased. "You seriously think I'm hot because I blow stuff up?"

"I do." Steve feels his cheeks heat. The blushing is so embarrassing. "Ezra was our munitions field expert. He, um, liked explosives. The guys used to bring him whatever we stole from the Germans--shells, bombs, things like that."

"Oh my god, you have an engineer-kink!" Tony says gleefully. "No wonder you like me in jeans, smelling of the shop."

Steve rolls his eyes. "I knew you'd find it hilarious."

"This is *priceless*. Wait til I tell--whoah. How could you not have fallen for dad? Oh. But he was an alpha anyway. Makes sense. Sorry, I know that's creepy."

"Tony," Steve says, embarrassed. "I didn't find your dad attractive. Jeez. I was the resident science experiment."

"Oh. Well. Everybody else always, you know, you hear stories about dad. The great patriot. Big ladies man."

"He was kind of careless, I thought. His big Expo attraction didn't work, and then he sort of blew up the vita-ray machines. He did a lot of good work during the war, I'm not saying otherwise. I owe him. But I'd rather have you doing our tech. It doesn't fail when you do it."

Tony looks down, at his hands.

Steve takes one and kisses the latest burn mark. "You keep working until it *works*. My turn. My next question is this. What were you doing when you asked Alex to take those photos of you and send them to me?"

"You didn't like them?" Tony asks archly.

"I loved them and you know it. I want to know what you were doing, Tony. Some of those photos aren't just of you looking like a tied up wet dream."

Tony raises an eyebrow. "I always look like a wet dream when I'm all tied up."

"Tony." Because honestly. "I just want to know what you were doing by sending the photos. Whether it was flirting with me as the two of you, or just as yourself, or what."

Tony looks away. "I don't know what I was doing."

Steve takes Tony's hand again. "Hey. It's just me. I liked it, and you liked it, and I'm pretty sure Alex liked it. I just want to understand it."

Tony scoots away a little, which is a shame. "You saw some of the ones with Alex in them. Right?"

"Yes." Steve had quite liked them. "My favorite is the one where you're in his lap, and he's looking down at you and laughing while you bite his chin."

Tony goes still. Very slowly, he looks up. He looks afraid, which is strange. "He sent you that?"

Steve takes out his phone from his back pocket. It's the second picture in the collection that Steve tagged 'Happy'.

The picture is just one of his very favorites. Alex is sitting cross legged in bed. His usually well groomed hair looks like it's been tousled by wild bears, and he's got a bite mark on his shoulder. He looks relaxed and happy, and his blue-green eyes are dancing as he laughs down at Tony.

Tony's sprawled in his lap, wearing nothing but gold and jewels, looking like pure trouble. There's something so Tony about the way he's nipping Alex's chin. Teasing and cheerful and shameless. So much affection, so unrepentant, so submissive.

Steve always feels warm and cheerful after he's looked at this picture, like the world is a less complicated, happier place. Worth saving.

He hands the phone over, and Tony takes it carefully. His scarred, work-worn hands cradle the metal and clear glass. He looks at it for a while, then warily up at Steve. Almost--feral. "You tagged this Happy."

"Yeah." Steve flips to the next picture, not sure what Tony will think of it. It's of Honey, backstage at a dance studio she performs at sometimes. The dancers had just done some weird performance of modern choreography depicting the four seasons--Steve hadn't understood it, exactly, but it had been beautiful.

The picture is of the greenroom--a bunch of dancers in white body suits and scraped back hair, stage makeup and stunned expressions. There's dozens and dozens of red roses all over the counters. Tony's just picked up Honey and is swinging her around the room like a prima ballerina. Her long legs are kicked out and her head is thrown back as she laughs--at the time, she was telling Tony he was an idiot who was gonna knock down everybody in the room and they'd all break their legs.

Tony looks at the picture, up at Steve, then flicks to the next one.

Clint, at Sunday breakfast, watching Phil eat his eggs. Clint's food is practically untouched, and Clint's expression is so tender it's almost painful.

The next picture is of Natasha, sipping vodka from a mug at poker night. It's subtle, but if you look closely, you can tell that she just won the whole pot. Her eyes are dancing with laughter, because she'd bluffed them all with two pair--again.

There's another picture of Tony, crouched over a motorcycle engine, wrench in his mouth as he fixes the plate back on. His hands are moving so fast they're nearly blurred, but he looks so alive--full of joy because he's saved another machine from the brink of destruction with nothing but the tools he carries in the back of his limo. The once light-gray suit he's wearing is a dead loss for sure, but the expression on the motorcycle courier's face is full of relief and awe.

There are more. Clint with his feet on Natasha's lap while they watch some boring movie in Russian. Her face rapt, his long suffering but fond. Phil, writing at the living room table with the fountain pen Clint gave him. Tony, Sunday cigarette dangling from his mouth as he says something suitably sarcastic to Clint. Another of Honey in Tony's robe, gesturing with a glass of juice made from exotic fruits, eyes like a raccoon's and arguing as cheerful as sunshine.

Tony flips all the way back. The cover for the album is a picture Steve took of all his colored pencils. Tony'd bought the full set, over two hundred and fifty colors, to stock Steve's room, and sometimes Steve likes to put the pencils in colorful piles on his desk and just look at them all. There's some large white and pink erasers, too, but the pencils are what makes Steve's heart sing.

"This is seriously your album of happy photos," Tony says, whizzing back through them again.

"Yes?" Steve asks, because Tony still seems so--odd. Like he finds this bizarre. "Lots of people keep their favorite photos on their phones. Natasha has a whole set of nothing but pictures of beautiful landscapes. She looks at them during boring meetings."

Tony flips back to the picture of him with Alex. He holds it up so Steve can see it. "This doesn't bother you at all?"

"No. It's one of my favorite pictures. What am I not getting, Tony?"

"It's just--you know Alex was fucking me, right?"

Steve rolls his eyes. "Yes. If I hadn't, I'd have figured it out by the third or fourth picture of him fucking you."

"Yes, I mean, I know that." Tony waves the phone at him again. "But Alex was--he's doing me. It's not just, you know. He's not--" Tony breaks off, like he's not sure what to say.

"This is a beautiful picture. Tell me what's wrong."

Tony looks at it again, then at Steve. "The chin biting is--I'm not supposed to do that. Do you even know what it means?"

Steve touches the back of Tony's hand where he's cradling the phone. "Tony. I lived in a bonded commando pack in a war zone. I know exactly what chin nipping means. It's a behavior the omega pack member makes to their dominant when they want to play, when they're feeling affectionate."

"It's not an omega behavior," Tony says miserably, "it's more than that."

"Tony, I said *the* omega. Not an omega. I meant it more literally, the lower ranked person--there's the leader of the pack, but there are other positions. There's nothing to be ashamed of in being submissive. I bet you were teasing Alex, getting him to laugh, getting him to play."

Tony strokes the phone. "I was, yeah. He's been kind of worried lately."

"Don't you think I like that?" Steve says, leaning forward. "Don't you think I enjoy that part of you? The part that's unafraid of us, that sees a stiff-necked dominant and thinks, wow, loosen up. Come play."

"He's not submissive," Tony says, looking up again, but still hunched over, wary. He looks far more feral now than he does in the phone picture. "Alex, I mean. He doesn't go boneless like me, just because someone pets his neck."

"That's OK," Steve says softly. "Alex doesn't have to be submissive like you."

"But you like submissives." Tony's bangs are in his eyes, and he's looking out from under them.

"Yes. I do. But it's not all I like." Steve keeps his gaze steady, but soft. Not threatening, but calm and certain. "Do you think I'd like Alex in bed?"

Tony looks down, away from him, shy again. Like that quicksilver change to feral and dangerous hadn't happened. "Yeah."

"But?" Steve asks, pressing.

"You can't treat him like you'd treat me." Tony's smile flashes up at Steve, then it's gone almost as fast it appears. "He bites."

Steve had never once doubted it. "I know this is a question I should really be asking him, but--why is Alex is a virgin? He's never been with an alpha before. Are you sure he'd even consider it?"

Tony cocks his head. "Alex has been with an alpha before. He told me."

"No. No alpha has ever come on him or in him. Never." Steve is absolutely certain of it.

"Are you sure?"

"Very." Steve remembers exactly how delicious that fresh turned earth smelled. How badly he wanted to claim it as his own.

"Wait. You really find him attractive." Tony leans forward, sniffing. "What the hell did you two get up to that day at the park?"

"He's charming and fierce and very clever." Steve tips his head back so Tony can smell more clearly. "What we got up to is that we talked and he sat in my lap."

"Would you like to have sex with Alex?" Tony asks, sniffing right against Steve's neck. "Whoah. Guess that's a yes."

"It's a yes," Steve says, trying not to move. Tony's right against the most sensitive part of his neck and it feels deliriously good. "Are you saying that he and I should--as part of solving my problem?"

Tony draws back. The look on his face is uncertain--very unusual for Tony, who is usually so decided. "I love Alex. I think you'd like him, too. Years ago, he told me that he'd always thought he'd follow me to wherever I wound up."

"His family was more understanding than yours, so he would go with whoever you married."

"Yes." Tony meets Steve's eyes. "But it's also that Alex has always just taken care of me. But that isn't really fair to him."

"You think he'll feel like what, a third wheel?" That's a phrase Dr Katz uses sometimes.

Tony blows out a breath. "Kind of, yes. When I asked him to stay with me, he insisted I talk to you first. He didn't want to make you uncomfortable."

"He's kind."

"Yes, but that's not just it. I don't think--" Tony sits back, runs his hands through his hair until it's a messy tangle. "Look, you've been dating me for weeks now. And you know I'm crazy about you. Alex has done just about everything humanly possible to tell me how much he loves me."

"But no one has courted him," Steve says. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah," Tony says. "I guess that's what I'm saying. But at the same time--if we're gonna fix you, we can't afford to wait forever while you court Alex. Or for you to only sex me up when I'm all cheerful and shit. I mean, the Kashmir and Honey and team snuggles will hold you some, but the clock is going tick-tock tick-tock. If you flip into Fight again, I'm pretty sure SHIELD will lock you in a room full of hot sexy Os and not let you out again until you've fucked them."

That was scarily plausible. Steve lays his hands on Tony's. This is a decision for his mate make. "What do you want me to do?"

Tony takes a deep breath. "We need to find out how much time we've got, and we need to know how much sex you need. I know it's going to be embarrassing to ask for details, but--"

"No, that makes sense." Steve is so glad he has Tony. "Do you want to ask the doctor? Should I? What about security?"

"I'll figure out security, and I think we'd better hit the doc together, if you're OK with it."

"I'd like you there," Steve says. It's the truth.

"OK. And..." Tony gnaws his lip. "I know you don't want other people to know about this, but I want to tell Honey, and Alex."

"You can tell them. I don't care if our pack knows. I just don't want to talk to SHIELD about it. Speaking of SHIELD. Tony, I'm going to handle Rowland and I need you to let me."

"You promised you wouldn't kill him," Tony says, and Steve can smell the anxiety coming back in waves.

"I'll hold that promise. But he's not allowed to torment you, either. I want you to let me handle him in my own way."

"I can handle him."

"I know you can," Steve says. This is important, because a lot of people don't see Tony's strengths. "But I believe you shouldn't have to. A creep like Rowland should be beneath your notice. You could deal with him, yes, but I'd rather you spend your time on more important matters. You do so much for all of us, Tony. Will you let me help out in this?"

"What if I say no?" Tony asks.

"Then I'll back off," Steve says immediately.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that." Steve takes a deep breath. "I want you to know that it's partly an alpha thing. I know you don't like that, but to me, my job is to make sure my mate is safe. It's the whole pack's job to make sure you're safe. Rowland being disrespectful to you is being disrespectful to all of us."

Tony is looking at him curiously, as if he'd never thought about this.

Maybe he hasn't. Maybe no one has ever explained to Tony what a real pack should do for the ones who are their heart. Tony was always doing so much, no naturally, that Steve always kept assuming Tony knew the other side of the bargain.

"Sweetheart, as part of courting you, I should have told you what you could ask of me. I'm not just asking you to be in my bed. I want you to know that I'm yours, too. You can have my strength, my protection, my help, whatever gifts I have to give, you can ask for them."

Tony's watching him closely, his eyes lively but unreadable. After a long moment, he leans in and kisses the edge of Steve's jaw. "Thank you. You can handle Rowland. If you want."

Steve runs a careful hand through Tony's hair, closing his eyes. "I want."

"OK." Tony leans into Steve's touch, just a little. "Then--we'll find out what the parameters of this are, first. You'll deal with Rowland. I'll tell Honey and get snuggle sessions set up. That leaves Alex. Steven, we can't fuck this up. I mean it."

"We're not going to, Tony." Steve cards his hand through Tony's curls again. "I won't hurt him. I'll just talk to him."

"I know, but you do realize he's not--" Tony's almost jittering with nerves again, shifting his weight. "He's just--if you don't like that, just, we'll figure something else out. I really don't mind being the one anyway, and if that's what you need, that's what you need."

"*Tony*." Steve says it firmly, loudly. "I didn't get a chance to finish telling you this before, but I know that Sa Richardson isn't submissive. He's very bold in bed. I've known omegas like that before. The modern world didn't invent types. I just never had a chance with one."

"He's barely even been with an alpha before, Steve. Back in school, I had to help him with his advanced deportment homework."

"Tony," Steve says softly. He realizes now that Tony has, in his own way, tried to arrange a contract marriage with his virginal best friend. No wonder Tony is terrified. "I won't hurt Alex. I promise. I'm just going to talk to him. He might say no, and if does, that's OK. I want you both to know that I would be delighted to have him in our pack, and in your bed, even if he doesn't want to be in mine."

"You really mean that," Tony says.

"I really mean that." Steve kisses Tony's soft hair. "Neither of you are to do anything with me that you don't want to do."

Tony tucks his nose against Steve's chest. "I still wish you'd consider at least having sex with me sometimes. I am really good at it, you know."

"I know you are." Steve wishes they could have this conversation another time, but they can't. "I loved what we did on the couch. I'd love to do more of that, sometime, but the way you blacked out--I didn't even realize it was happening."

"I told you, don't worry about it." Tony sounds so matter of fact. "It wasn't anything you did. It just happens."

"OK," Steve says, taking a deep breath. "When you say that blacking out during lovemaking just happens, it makes me uncomfortable. I don't know what to think about it, and I'm still trying to work out my own feelings. For my own comfort, I'd like to just have sex that I'm sure I won't feel guilty about, if it turns out you do blackout."

Tony pulls away and looks Steve up and down. "Babe, did you memorize that whole speech?"

Maybe. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt your feeling?"

"No," Tony says, and he sounds bemused. "But I've never had a lover spout therapy-speak about doing the horizontal tango. You worked that out at the doc's office, didn't you?"

"Yes." Steve ducks his head. "I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have told her about it."

"Hey, no, it's OK. It's fine. You're such a sweetheart, I forget how you get. I guess the blackout really freaked you out, huh?"

The blackout. The panic attack when Steve asked about Fromm. The way Tony had seemed into having his clothes ripped off but how upset he'd been about the torn shirt later. And more than anything, how utterly relaxed Tony was in the photos from Alex. Years younger, face less lined, clearly better rested.

"Yes," Steve says. "I want our lovemaking to be like it was on the couch."

Tony makes a pleased humming noise. "I won't argue with that. I can't believe they fucking interrupted our goddamn afterglow. I could have killed Rowland for that alone."

Steve could have killed Rowland for any of it, but all he says is, "Would you like to try recapturing it?"

"There's other things we should probably discuss. Like how to make sure SHIELD doesn't get into any more of your medical files at NYU."

"I think we've probably done enough for the day," Steve says.

"It's like nine o'clock in the morning," Tony says drily.

"Are you telling me you slept?" Steve asks. He reaches out and grabs one of the cashmere throws draped over the back of the other sectional couch.

"Well," Tony says, hedging. "I had a few things to do."

Steve knows that Tony didn't spend the time here at Stark House, and he's pretty sure that Tony didn't spend all that long on the engine repairs. Tony probably went someplace quiet to think.

"I didn't sleep, either," is all Steve says. Very gently, he turns and lays down on the couch. Tony might still be too upset from Rowland, but Steve thinks Tony will at least enjoy being given the offer. He knows that Tony hates being treated as broken, and if snuggling together does create a blackout, at least it will be one that Steve won't feel guilty over. It will just be one of those choices that Tony gets to make.

To Steve's quiet delight, Tony grabs the cashmere blanket and drapes himself over Steve.

Steve arranges the blanket over them both, then wraps his arms around Tony and closes his eyes.

"Jarvis," Tony says.

"Sir?"

"If anyone, and I mean *anyone*, calls, tell them to fuck off and die. No one is interrupting our afterglow this time. I don't care who it is or what they want. The world will just have to fucking get by without us for the next little while. I mean it."

"Very good, Sir."

Steve's smiling into Tony's wayward curls as Jarvis dims the lights.

Chapter 67

Chapter Notes

Unexpected hiatus was unexpected. Jeez. Hello my lovelies, I am really really sorry about dropping off the face of the earth. Again.

I can't explain the crisis I was dealing with because of work confidentiality reasons, but it was pretty awful. Things are better and hopefully safer, and that should, uh, tell you plenty. Yeaaah. I would like a do-over for January. Because that sucked.

Anyway! So, here is the deal. Today's chapter is too restful for proper pacing, but I really wanted to give Tony a bit of a rest after the last few days in the story. Things are going to pick up in the next few chapters, so consider this a calm before the storm (and a calm before the porn, heh). I hope you will indulge my desire to have something a little restful. The next chapters are embarrassingly long, but I hope to have the edits done shortly. It will include the first Alex POV chapter.

Speaking of which, I've had several questions about whether I'll go back and revise and re-include the original version of the story. Yes, once the whole epic is drafted, I will. I am also going to include corrections/edits/caught typos, etc. Um, sadly, I am going to have to re-create some of my early scenes/bits because I wasn't very careful in early drafts about saving. I had a section where Tony's young, having adventures at school, that is now lost to the Mists of the Delete Key. (I now use an out-takes file, because even if I suck at organizing wonking great drafts, at least I can learn from my mistakes.) Also, some astute readers have noticed that this is a series. Yes! When this first great volume is done, I have a couple of other adventures planned, including a Natasha-centric adventure.

Timeline for recent events and this chapter:
Steve sees doctor, doctor calls SHIELD/military to verify Steve's medical info, SHIELD is tipped off by that, begins Machinations
Tony returns from Alex-vacation, Steve/Tony celebrate, Steve plans to tell Tony, but Rowland has Tony summoned to Helicarrier for mechanical fix, blindsides Tony
Tony goes to think, figure things out
Tony talks to Steve (takes place around dawn)
They take one full day to nap, per Tony's emphatic insistence
Then this next scene happens

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve's sitting at his desk, working on strategies when Jarvis summons him. He heads to the living room.

It's only been one day, but he knows Tony's been working up a plan to help Steve's depleted alpha system. They're still going to see the doctor for the sex information, but it will take longer because Tony has to 'rewire the entire NYU security mainframe by hand except not really gorgeous so don't worry about it'.

But Tony thinks he can get them started on the easier bits. That's got to be what the summons is about. Tony's been refusing to tell him any details, except bland reassurances that Steve 'worries too much' and 'should relax' because doctor's orders.

When Steve enters the living room, he finds Honey with her hands on her hips, glaring at Tony.

Tony is standing with his arms crossed, looking irritated and disapproving.

"What are you, the blankie nazi? Everybody likes Tigger best," Honey says. "If you bought that man a Dora blankie--"

"I didn't buy him one at all. I got him a perfectly nice navy blue comforter with six hundred thread count Egyptian cotton!"

Steve watches bemusedly as Honey ups her glare. "You can't cuddle with that. That's like, an adult boring person comforter. Creepy corporate dudes sleep under shit like that."

"Hey!" Tony says.

"Oh, like you've ever been a corporate dude a day in your life, Mr I've never had a normal job. We're using the damn Pooh blankie and that's the end of it."

They both notice him at the same time.

Steve nearly backs up a step, because the two omegas are staring at him with identical narrow-eyed expressions. Intent, determined. Whatever they've planned, it's obviously pretty serious.

"Steven," Tony says with a manic little smile. "Honey's here, so we're all set."

"Hey Steve," Honey says, waving cheerfully. "I'll be your lovey on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Tony's got it all set up. Come on over to the couch and we'll get started, OK?"

Steve can't quite get his feet to move. Lovey? No, he's really not sure this is such a good idea. He's very fond of Honey, but not in that way. When he looks for Tony, he's disappeared into the kitchen to mysterious rustling noises.

Honey's already marching over to him. "Hey, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. My friend Sheila, her brother was like this when he got back from Iraq."

"Really?" Steve says. He's still not moving.

"Oh yeah. He was stuck on like four tours because he was a bomb detection specialist." Honey's tiny, but fearless. When she grabs his hand, he finds himself pulled over to the big comfortable couch. "Come on, yeah, here."

Honey plops down and tugs Steve down beside her. Isn't this where Tony had that very first orgy? Oh god.

Steve swallows hard. Honey's eyes are kind, though. Her makeup is plainer than usual. Just some mascara and lip-gloss--less than the girls in his day wore, actually. Her short hair is soft and flat today, mannish, without any pomade to make it spiky. She's wearing a soft tee shirt and loose knit pants, thick socks.

It resembles an outfit Natasha sleeps in sometimes.

"I'm just gonna tell you what we did for Richie, and you can see if that'll suit you. OK?"

"Is Richie the soldier who served in Iraq?"

"Yep." Honey smells nothing like Tony or Sa Richardson. She's got a comfortable scent that reminds Steve of the grassy banks by the side of the highway in France. Sweet and bright, but with the cheerful hint of road dust and interesting passing traffic.

"OK," Steve says. He can always say no to whatever she suggests.

"So, for Richie, what we did was I laid down, right, with my back against the arm rest, and then he laid down with his head right here." Honey lays a hand over her heart. "So he could hear my pulse. Sounds kinda creepy to some guys, but he said it was sorta soothing. And then I pulled the blankie up, and I sorta petted his hair and we talked and snuggled."

That doesn't sound so bad, but.... "That helped him cope from coming back from combat?"

"It was part of it. He needed a little comfort. Gentleness, you know? It's not going to upset me if a guy cries." Honey's eyes are still kind, but they're also knowing. "You work as a pro for years, you learn that's part of life. There ain't nothing you got inside that I can't handle, OK?"

Steve swallows hard. Honey reminds him sharply of the French madam they'd played poker with. She said much the same thing, and her stable had certainly handled all of his men just fine. "OK."

"Then the next part is, see me and Tony, we don't necessarily agree. He said I could talk to you about it, though. See what you thought. For Richie, he needed to know he could still be a man."

Steve's not used to hearing people talk like that now. "Oh?"

"Yeah." Honey tips her head to the side, considers him. "See, he sorta felt broken. Like he was too scary to be around anymore. Too violent, right? But he also felt useless. All he's good for is sitting on the couch, collecting his VA check. Just nothing but trouble for everyone he knows, and especially for everyone he cares about."

That's uncomfortably close to the truth.

"So, Richie, he says that the only time he felt useful was when he was working the bomb detail. But that just leads to trying to do more work, which is a bust, because he's already burnt out and getting flash-backs and stuff."

"But you said what you did made him feel more of a man," Steve says.

"Yeah. This is the part Tony and I don't exactly agree on." Honey gnaws her lip. "We asked him to help out. Like, personal stuff? I don't know if anybody's doing that. Maybe too many people already ask you for help--that's what Tony thought."

"I do get called up," Steve says. "Tony thinks it's too often."

"No, I don't mean the work stuff. See, I have a friend who has to move. She's got a lot of big furniture. If you helped out, she wouldn't have to hire as many movers. Or, maybe you could come by on Saturday night at the club, if Tony does. Walk us girls to our cars."

"Are people hassling you?" Steve asks.

Honey shrugs.

"Are they?" Steve asks, pressing.

"You get assholes at strip clubs. Might as well be part of the benefits package."

Steve does Dr Katz's exercise. He imagines walking a couple of dancers to their cars. How it makes him feel. "I'd like it if you felt you could call me for help or protection. In a family kind of way."

"OK," Honey says. "And like, my friend Kari? She's redoing her living room. Tony says you're good with art and all, like a real artist. Kari wants to pick the right colors for her walls to go with this painting her mama's boyfriend did for her. So, can you help her out if she comes to the club Saturday?"

"Sure," Steve says. He's not sure what picking wall colors has to do with his depleted sexual system, but it'll be something different to think about.

"Now, you gotta lie down," Honey says, patting her ample chest.

Steve swings his feet onto the couch first and then carefully eases himself down. "Am I too heavy?"

"As if," Honey says. "You're not even on me, big guy."

Honey takes him by the shoulders and rearranges him bodily. Steve's not convinced it's entirely polite to rest his head on Honey's chest, but her tiny hands pull him firmly against her. And then, just as she said, he can hear the steady thud-thud of her heart.

"There," Honey says with satisfaction. She drapes a large ugly blue fleece blanket over them both. It's covered in cartoon tigers. "You just hang out here, and we'll swap stories and stuff."

Steve's heard some of Honey's stories at poker night. They're always bawdy, usually funny, and occasionally terrifying. Steve hadn't known you could make a flame-thrower with a can of aerosol hairspray and a lighter, but now he does. He also knows what it will do to a squinty-eyed pimp with wandering hands and a limp dick. Steve's heard that story twice, in fact, because Clint made Honey repeat it for the benefit of Phil ("since you were dead and all, that first time around," as Honey put it.)

As Steve's listening to the steady rhythm of Honey's heartbeat and wondering why she smells like strawberries, Tony appears. He's got a plate full of snacks and drinks, which he sets in easy reach on the coffee table.

"How's it coming?" Tony asks.

"He's doing real good," Honey tells him earnestly, before Steve can open his mouth. "I told him about Richie, and he's gonna come to the club Saturday. You remember Kari, right?"

"Jesus Christ," Tony says. He plops down cross-legged on the floor next to them. "Isn't she the one who dated that Canadian bull-rider?"

"Yeah," Honey says. She takes a couple of cookies and absently breaks them into bite sized pieces, which she offers to Steve's mouth.

Steve looks at her in astonishment, but she's not looking at him. Hand feeding is what an alpha offers their courted omega during heat. It's not ever something an omega should offer an alpha.

Tony takes his own cookie and breaks it into bits. "I seem to remember he got gored by a bull or something."

"Not gored," Honey says. "He just landed wrong somehow. Bruised his balls and did something weird to the suspensory ligament on his dick. Got laid up for six weeks and his tackle was all purple and green for like three months, plus, he couldn't get hard. Looked like a zombie dick. Kari took a pic with her phone. I still have it. Shared it with the girls for Halloween."

"Gross," Tony says, popping a bite of cookie in his mouth. "You don't like pecan sandies, Steven? It's Sa Frazer's recipe. Real butter."

"No, I do, I just--" Steve gives up. Feeding alphas by hand must be a modern world thing.

Honey absently offers him another cookie bite, and this time Steve eats it. The cookie is rich with butter and pecans, almost melty. When Steve's done chewing, Tony offers him a bite, and Steve eats that next.

Tony's been finding new ways to up Steve's calorie intake in case it will help his system recover. Also, because "Who can be depressed if they're eating shit this fucking fantastic," as Clint so elegantly put it at breakfast this morning. Tony had smacked him on the back of his head, but very gently, before refilling his plate. Again.

Steve listens as Honey recounts stories of Kari's two latest boyfriends--the most recent ex, who was kind of a keeper, except for moving to Florida--and the current squeeze, who is shit on the bottom of God's shoe, if there is any justice in the world, which there isn't.

Tony bitches companionably along with her, adding a few comments about people she's dated. At one point, Honey sticks her tongue out at him. "Like you're one to talk," she says.

"Hey! I have excellent taste in men," Tony says, gesturing emphatically at Steve and getting cookie crumbs everywhere.

"I have two words for you," Honey says darkly, "Ed Ellis."

"I dumped him," Tony says, but he looks warily at Steve. "Besides, you dated Nolan."

"I only dated him two weeks and in my defense, I didn't know he was Nolan. He told me his name was Vic Stevenson."

"He was a drug dealer!" Tony says, which makes Honey burst out laughing.

"OK, fine," Tony says hastily, "He was a coke dealer. I'm just saying--"

"Drug dealers can't be trusted?" Honey laughs some more. "You would know."

Tony sticks his tongue out at her.

Honey throws a pillow at him, but Tony snatches it out of the air before there's any damage to the huge plate of snacks.

"Very funny," Tony says, trying for dignity but failing because his mouth keeps twitching.

"I thought so," Honey says cheerfully. "Speaking of which, Tony sweetie, we gotta get Robin out of that sleazo joint. She could really make it if she had the chance. I know this guy in Queens she'd really like, but her heart's still busted up over that shitstain Casey."

Steve relaxes as the two bicker back and forth. After a while, Steve points out that O'Malley's down in Brooklyn is hiring waitresses. The tips may not be up to the standard of Tequila Joe's in Queens, but Steve is sure there is no shady backroom business.

"How do you know?" Honey asks curiously. "Do you know a guy at O'Malley's?"

"I like to play pool," Steve says.

Tony snorts. "You do not. You like to watch me play pool."

"Well, it's very interesting. You always tell me about the physics of the balls."

Honey hoots with laughter. "I'll just bet he does."

Steve rolls his eyes, but he's laughing, too. It's a little bit like sitting around the fire, swapping dirty stories and drinking coffee stolen from German supply trucks.

When he settles back against Honey's chest, he hears the steady beat of her heart.

Tony looks up at him and smiles, and Steve smiles back.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I have the very best commenters in the world. I hope to have next chapter up soon. Until then, grab a Tigger blankie and stay warm!

Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

> *looks around blearily* Is it April already? Jeez. Yes, I have been hiding under a rock. My family member is not doing very well (currently in hospital), so I'm sorry to say that my sporadic posting schedule will continue for a bit. I do have quite a lot drafted, but it all has to be edited, and my mind only works well on that periodically. Thanks to everyone who posted kind thoughts.
>
> I hope you enjoy this chapter! I have another scene out to my beta, so hopefully more will be posted soon (although I promise not to leave a cliffhanger up).

Steve hunches his shoulders against the bitter wind. Canada in late winter is brutal, and even the heavy overcoat that appeared like magic in his closet one morning is not enough to cut the chill.

The scraping of the tree branches against each other reminds him of the noises ice makes, all sharp cracks and small screams, bitter sounds.

It's a good spot.

Even the ice itself will help keep Steve on high alert, make his instincts give him more information about Rowland's sincerity.

"Choose someplace that will block aerial satellite photos," Sa Richardson had told him. Also, if possible, make it a spontaneously chosen location exposed to extreme weather conditions, since water and temperature fluctuations are unfriendly to most advanced tech. Desert, ocean, tundra.

The omega had gone on to explain other strategies, too. "I don't smoke just because it's a nicotine habit," Sa Richardson told Steve. "I do it to test whether Jarvis's control over an internal environment is complete. If the smoke alarm goes off, we know there's a gap."

For each strategic solution, Sa Richardson recommended at least two additional fail safes. "So, cigarettes, plus having Jarvis pop and unpop some locks. Or increase a room's ambient temperature. And so on. Two backups, in case the first backup should fail. Rotate your backups and your strategies, so that your habits do not become a predictable way to track you or entrap you."

Sa Richardson's explanation of the security measures involved in their rendezvous at the park had taken almost an hour, and the security measures for the Shield headquarters even longer.

Steve was impressed all over again at Tony's choice of mate.

Asking Sa Richardson for assistance in the security for Steve's meeting with Rowland situation has had several benefits. Steve's main concern had been to include Tony's mate in all pack dealings relating to Tony, but it's also nice to just get a chance to talk with the lovely omega about something besides Steve's failings.

At Tony's request, Steve hasn't fully explained Rowland's machinations--Tony doesn't want Sa Richardson to feel pressured to leave Terrence early--but Steve has told the charming inquisitive omega that Rowland has rubbed Tony the wrong way and Steve intends to set him straight.

After patiently answering Steve's questions about how best to set the scene so Shield wouldn't overhear, Sa Richardson had told Steve he would courier over the necessary tech for Steve's meeting, as well as some additional information that Steve might find helpful.

Steve hadn't been expecting the beautifully made handouts entitled 'How to Have a Private Conversation', produced by the Trixthonos Corporation. There was *How to Have a Private Conversation: In Person, How to Have a Private Conversation: On the Phone, How to Have a Private Conversation: Videoconference Edition*.

There were more, including a credit-card sized laminated card with the mnemonics for various strategies, and the phone number to Trixthonos' legal and tech hotlines, as well two canned phrases to use if questioned by the police. "I'm very sorry, officer, but I can't answer your questions until my lawyer arrives." "My name is X, and I'm terribly sorry if I seem difficult, but I am contractually obligated by my company to not answers questions without my lawyer present. Please forgive what must seem like callous disregard of civic duty."

Steve had immediately put the card in his wallet.

Now the wind is slamming into him again, and Steve braces himself. Rowland should be done with the young sergeant at any moment.

Sure enough, Rowland comes striding briskly around the little supply hut that served as staging headquarters for their latest field exercise.

Steve gestures with his chin, a trick he picked up in the war so you don't have to take your hand out of your pockets--or off your gun. "Walk with me?"

"Certainly, Captain." Rowland is too experienced an agent to let himself look nervous, but Steve's heightened senses can smell it.

Steve leads the way into the trees, out of the wind, and it's even better.

All around them, the black branches creak and wave like skeletal fingers.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve sees Rowland shiver. Yes, this was a good choice. Canada's vast wilderness is famous as a dumping ground for bodies--hard to identify after the scavengers are done with them, as Sa Richardson said. Steve had raised his eyebrow, and Sa Richardson had raised one right back.

Then they'd grinned at each other.

"Captain," Rowland says tentatively.

Steve glances over, stepping easily around fallen logs and patches of underbrush.

"Captain, I suspect I know why we're having this talk," Rowland says. He sounds like he's bracing himself.

Steve doesn't answer, just steps up onto a huge log, then offers his gloved hand to help Rowland over it.

The hesitation is less than a second, then Rowland takes Steve's hand. Steve pulls him easily onto the great ancient tree's carcass.

Further along the line of log, in the mass of moss and scattered leaves and shattered bark, Steve can see the tiny shoots of young trees. 'Nursery log', Sa Richardson had called it, because the dead tree's crash opened up enough light from the over story and the dead bark and rotting wood of its trunk gave enough bracken-free soil for young trees to establish themselves. The young shoots are probably even from the sister tree next to it, or maybe even its own seeds, and thus the grand old tree is born anew, very near the place it once had been.

"Captain?" Rowland says, and now he sounds hesitant.

Steve only gives him a mild look, knowing darn well his silence is ratcheting up the man's nerves.

Steve hasn't lost the knack of judging distances by feel, so when they've reached Sa Richardson's minimum recommended distance of three hundred yards, Steve says, "Why don't you tell me why you think we're having this talk."

"Na Stark," Rowland says. He sounds a little glum, and it serves the man right. "I'd intended my talk with him to help reassure his understandable fears about serving as the only omega on the team, but I'm afraid I made matters worse."

"Is that what you think happened?"

"I know that when he left, he was very distressed."

"You could say," Steve says drily. They're the five hundred yards that's probably safe to stop and chat, but Steve decides he'll wait for another big log. "He had a panic attack. Were you aware of that?"

"Na Stark does have some significant triggers," Rowland says, scrambling over another fallen branch. "I realize I wasn't as tactful as I should have been, but under the circumstances..."

Steve turns. "Agent. You gave Na Stark a panic attack."

Rowland opens his mouth, and Steve just knows he's going to say something about it being because Tony's easily rattled.

"You see, agent," Steve says, "I took a page from your playbook. I had the surveillance played back. The surveillance from that part of the bay and the hallway. I noticed that on several distinct occasions, Na Stark offered classic submissive omega calming behaviors--turning his chin, baring his throat, ducking his gaze, moving bodily away from your personal space. Instead of retreating or allowing Na Stark to regain his bearings, you continued to push your verbal interrogation."

"I wasn't interrogating him, I was--"

"Well, what would you call it?" Steve asks, stepping into Rowland's space.

Rowland doesn't retreat, but it costs him. "I was trying to help him. Na Stark is in a difficult position, and I wanted to clarify several important points so that, as his handler, things could be arranged to better suit Na Stark."

"Things," Steve repeats pleasantly. "Which things would these be?"

There's a faint tinge to Rowland's cheeks, and Steve just raises his eyebrow. Waiting in silence was Sa Richardson's number one recommended technique for handling Rowland. And, as Steve expected, Sa Richardson is correct. It's driving Rowland nuts.

"I'm sure you know what I mean," Rowland says.

"Not really," Steve says, and waits.

Sure enough, there's a tic on Rowland's jaw now. Sa Richardson is right. This could be a lot of fun.

"The situation at Stark House," Rowland blurts out at last.

Yes, Steve is glad he followed the omega's advice. Sometimes, Sa Richardson had said, you can startle them into accidental honesty.

"Which situation would that be?" Steve asks, just to wind him up.

"You know very well what situation," Rowland says, and he sounds annoyed and embarrassed at the same time. "It's not appropriate for a team to fraternize in that way. It's not fair to Na Stark."

Steve cocks his head. Interesting. He'd swear this is Rowland's own opinion, unprompted by any higher up. It's also not at all what Steve is expecting.

"Captain, you must know by now that Na Stark is a very generous person," Rowland says. "He offered everyone a place in his home out of kindness, and, I personally believe, out of a desire to help Agent Barton."

"Yes," Steve says, because giving honesty will get some. "Yes, he did."

"Na Stark couldn't very well have invited Agent Barton alone. The Director would never have agreed, and it would have sent the wrong message anyway. By inviting the entire team, Na Stark provided a plausible reason for including Barton and also gave Barton some much-needed social support."

"Yes," Steve says. This is a much more nuanced read than Steve expects from the man, if he's honest. Especially after Rowland's strange blundering attempt to arrest Sa Richardson, Steve hadn't thought Rowland all that smart.

"When Na Stark made that offer, he had no idea that you would experience such a heightened level of Fight. The incident at the Celebration of Heroes with Senator Fromm," Rowland sneers the name, and the scent of Rowland's disgust is palpable. Steve would swear Rowland hates him. "The incident with the Senator could be put down to what any alpha who knew and liked Na Stark might do."

"Agent," Steve says thoughtfully, "are you under the impression that the hangar bay was my first incident with Na Stark?"

"I know you lost your temper in a sleazy pool hall," Rowland says. "Why anyone would take an omega as cultured as Na Stark to such a place is--" He stops himself. "But again, it would be a natural alpha reaction."

Steve turns around, showing Rowland his back. It's something Steve's always done, but he was interested to find out that Sa Richardson did the same thing.

'Walk away, show your back, bare your belly," Sa Richardson said. 'It will show him that you consider him to be so low on the status scale that he couldn't possibly be a threat to you. And if he does attack, why, what an absolutely lovely excuse to hit back. Self-defense is always preferable to striking first, don't you agree, Captain?'

Steve had laughed, because Sa Richardson had used his coy breathy dame voice, and the military title had felt almost like a nickname. A reminder that Sa Richardson knows Steve's a tactician and a soldier. The fluttering lashes had been an adorable bonus.

So Steve bares his back, strides deeper into the shadowy black trees, walking softly out of habit, making no noise even in the winter-hard land.

"Captain," Rowland says, hurrying up behind him. He sounds annoyed and out of breath from the chilly air. "Are you saying there have been other incidents where you dipped into Fight over Na Stark?"

"Nope." Steve easily steps over a two foot log, but helpfully assists the shorter man. "I just wondered whether you thought me being in Fight during the Dayton mess two months ago counted."

"No," Rowland says shortly. "The Kestrel killed seven school children and was holding thirteen more hostage. Fight was justified."

Steve doesn't like remembering it, so he lets the matter drop. It had been important to ask at least one clarifying question. Make sure he understood where Rowland stood. "Tell me something, agent. I wasn't at the meeting. I only have Na Stark's retelling to go by, and he was pretty upset. What exactly is it you think Na Stark should do?"

Rowland looks hopefully at the clearing up ahead, but it's too exposed. Steve steers them deeper under the canopy, away from satellite range. "I don't think it's for Na Stark to do anything," Rowland says. He smells....odd. Not wistful, exactly, but something similar.

"You sure did seem to have a lot of stuff you thought he was doing wrong."

"It's not that," Rowland says, and now he smells distressed. "I know Na Stark got the impression that I felt he was a failure, but the opposite is the case. I think he's handled the situation admirably."

"Oh? So you're happy with everything?"

"No, of course not." Rowland harrumphs. "I feel, and Shield feels, that it's unfair to ask Na Stark to assist with the issue of your para-sexual system. We would much rather approach it differently."

With a hypodermic needle to the throat?

"How would you like to approach it?" Steve asks. It's his damn system. It would've been nice if Rowland had talked to Steve about it before going to Tony.

Rowland stops, so Steve stops, too.

"Captain, I'm sure you're aware that alphas of your stature usually acquire more than one spouse," Rowland says. His hands are in his pockets, and his gaze is firm and direct.

Steve could argue that having any omega permanently isn't exactly an option for every high-level alpha, at least not if they were as poor as Steve grew up, but he's aware that arguing about class would only prolong this discussion. "Yes."

"Then you must have plans."

Steve raises his eyebrows.

"Plans for a second spouse," Rowland snaps. "An additional sexual partner."

Steve just waits, because yes, this is very revealing.

"It's irresponsible of you not to tell Na Stark your personal preference for multiple partners," Rowland says, and he sounds very angry.

"This would be the Na Stark who Assistant Director Hill asked me to speak with concerning his promiscuity. That Na Stark?" Steve asks pleasantly.

Sure enough, Rowland turns purple. "You must be aware that promiscuity is a common side effect of sexual trauma. It was included in your briefing packet, since you wouldn't have known that before."

"Strange as you might find it," Steve says, "we had sexual trauma back in the 40s. But I don't really see how it's any of your business what I have or haven't told Na Stark about what I like in bed."

"Of course it's my business. I am his handler."

"But you're not mine?" Steve asks.

Rowland meets his gaze squarely again. "You and I both know it's not the same. Na Stark is an omega."

"He is. I wonder what it says about your handling style that Na Stark wouldn't come into the headquarters yesterday when Jarvis informed him that you were present and wished to speak to him."

Rowland's gaze drops. "I see. I know my discussion with him did not go well."

"You gave him a panic attack," Steve says. Again. "You know, agent, you should be grateful that Tony came home to Stark House that day."

"Grateful, why? Where else would he go?"

Any number of places, but Steve doesn't say that. "The days preceding your little unfortunate meeting, Na Stark was staying with a dear friend from school. Tony said he wanted to stay with Alex for a little bit, since Alex always makes him feel better."

Rowland frowns. "I understand why Na Stark would find Alex Richardson's company reassuring."

Even more interesting. "They're good friends?"

"They are, yes," Rowland says, but he tucks his hands deeper into his pockets. "I prefer to use modern scientific terms, but I doubt you'd be familiar with them."

"I don't mind slang," Steve says mildly. This--this is going to quite telling.

"In slang terms, Alex Richardson is a bitch." Rowland nods. "I see you know that term. He's also what you used to call a boss mare."

"I'm surprised he's not married," Steve says, because playing along is the only thing he can do. Shoving his fist down Rowland's throat would only satisfy him briefly. Besides, he had promised Tony.

"He took some sweet young thing as a spouse, for a while, but I hear that was to put his family off. Rumor has it they'll settle him down eventually. Or it's possible the DEA will get him."

Steve doesn't think so, but he makes the appropriate noise. "Seems a shame. He's a looker."

Rowland snorts. "He's very beautiful, I will give you that. And I've seen them together."

"Have you?"

"Look, Na Stark can take care of himself when it comes to weapons and direct attacks," Rowland says, as if Steve is being disrespectful of Tony for being fond of Alex. "But Na Stark didn't grow up with much family. It's understandable that he'd take comfort in someone he's known a long time, and Richardson is, well, he's..."

"Indulgent?" Steve suggests. He supplies the word before Rowland chooses anything worse.

"Yes, yes, exactly. Richardson is very indulgent with Na Stark. Calls him Tony, wraps his arm around his shoulders, gets very close. Well, you know how omegas get."

Steve watches the branches sway in the trees. There's an unfamiliar note to Rowland's scent that Steve can't place. Odd. "Some of my old omegas had special friends. I think it's good for them."

Rowland relaxes visibly. "I think so, too."

"That is the sense I got," Steve says, because he is sure Rowland already knows this. "That Na Stark and Richardson are friends like that."

"I'm sure they are. It's part of why I'm making the recommendations I'm making." Rowland takes out his phone. He flips to a picture, hands it over.

Steve takes it curiously.

She's young, maybe twenty, with lush auburn hairs, sparkling lively eyes, a wide smile. There's something wholesome about her, even if she is wearing the kind of sexy outfit the modern era believes is appropriate for marriage packets. There's no visible jewelry, and Steve can almost smell the virginity from here.

"Who is she?"

"Brianna Pearl Kinney," Rowland says, taking his phone back. "She's a Pearl omega, obviously, and she was educated at the River Valley School in Vermont. It's very reputable, very respectable."

Steve feels the muscle in his left eye twitch. "I think she's a little young, agent."

"No, no," Rowland says earnestly. "You misunderstand. It will be better this way, trust me. If Na Stark has someone that he feels he can tutor, who is younger, she'll be less threatening. Na Stark is very determined to be the emotional support in your marriage, Captain, and a younger spouse will let Na Stark take the lead there."

"I meant that Na Stark prefers older lovers," Steve says gently. His own preferences are irrelevant to this conversation, but he wouldn't bed that little girl in any case.

"Yes, well," Rowland says, flipping to a few other screens, "I think Bri will bring him around."

"Hm," Steve says.

"Here," Rowland says, and he sounds so happy that Steve just knows he's going to hate whatever is next.

Sure enough...

Brianna is wearing a black cocktail dress and at her feet is a young omega. This one is much more ambiguous in gender, blond, shy, and sweet. The kneeling omega looks as though she's shivering, and Steve wants to give the poor thing his coat. Hir tarty dress is nude-colored and so skimpy it hardly covers the young O's bottom.

It's the worried look that the young omega is shooting hir mistress that makes Steve glance away.

Say what you will about Alex Richardson, Steve thinks there is no way that any of Alex's submissives would be kneeling in uncertainty about what he wanted.

"See?" Rowland says. "We show Stark this and he'll be thrilled."

Steve cannot help it. He just cannot. "Could you send me a copy of this photo, agent?"

"Of course," Rowland says, sounding pleased. "Now look, Captain, it's possible the girl's parents will want a longer courtship than Shield will feel is acceptable. But I wanted you to understand that when I talked to Na Stark about finding you some partners, I wasn't joking about trying to find partners that meet his needs every bit as much as they meet yours."

"I can see that," Steve says. And he can.

It's kind of depressing, actually.

"Now I'd like you to take a look at this one," Rowland says.

Steve holds out his hand for the phone.

"This is Roman Stanton," Rowland says, looking at the photo, too.

Roman Stanton can't be more than sixteen. He has dark brown hair, green eyes, and the kind of sweet expression that Tony has when he's deeply, deeply under. An earnest desire to please that makes Steve's heart ache.

"You can't put two extremely submissive omegas in the same bed," Steve says, handing the phone back. "They'll fight."

"How did you know he was--" Rowland frowns. "And I know that's an old wives tale, but--"

"They'll fight," Steve says. "No. And also, Agent, I realize you're hoping to resolve this issue, but I think there's been some confusion."

"Oh?" Rowland looks through more photos. He's settled on a cheeky looking redhead that Steve wouldn't sleep with for ten million dollars. That one would steal your wallet as soon as look at you.

"Yes." Steve stretches out his legs, crosses his ankles. "Tony isn't going to date anyone you pick, much less allow them enter the confines of his house."

"Now Captain, I realize that Na Stark can appear difficult, but I think a bitch like Brianna would be able to--"

"Brianna isn't a bitch." Steve's abruptly lost patience. "She's a pushy middle-status female-oriented omega who's worried that she won't attract a dowry large enough to please her parents. If you showed that photo to Na Stark, he'd be on the phone, trying to rescue Bri's 'lover' in ten seconds."

"But Captain--"

"Furthermore, Na Stark has a lot more he's looking for in a lover than the ability to boss him around in bed."

"Of course," Rowland says. "Na Stark has his pick. Now, I have his preferences listed as sexually skillful, physically attractive, emotionally mature, and confident."

"See, and this is where you and I differ, Rowland." Steve leans forward, elbows on his knees. "That pretty little girl in the sparkly black dress sure did put on a nice show for the photographer, but do you really think she's emotionally mature? Confident? Never mind sexually skillful."

"Her young omega lover was very positive in the packet--"

Steve flips open his own phone to the dastardly photo. "The leash is tight, her lover is worried and confused not just submissive, and Brianna has little lines of worry between her eyebrows. I can see you're doing your best, Rowland, and it's a good thought. Kind." Steve pats him on the shoulder. "You're showing initiative, I like that."

Rowland looks like he's just swallowed a fish. Sa Richardson's advice is working. 'If you can't baffle them with bullshit, baffle them with praise. Sincere praise confuses the hell out of people.'

It sure does seem to be working now.

"But despite that, we need to approach this differently," Steve says kindly. "Tell me what other qualities your research has shown you about Na Stark's preferences."

"Well," Rowland says slowly, "Na Stark does show a marked preference for alphas who are above a seven."

Steve nods encouragingly. "What else?"

"Na Stark says he likes male alphas the best," Rowland blurts out. "It's a question that he gets asked all the time, in many different contexts. The Shield testers for his more recent Klennecky scores even noted it. But those testers noted the same thing that our field specialists did."

"Na Stark actually prefers female omegas?" Steve says. He pulls out a packet of cigarettes and offers one to Rowland.

Rowland takes it absently. "Yes. It's why I chose Brianna from the list of candidates that Shield gave me as a prelim list for you. She's the closest available."

"Mm," Steve says, lighting Rowland's, then his own. There's no tell-tale owl noise from Jarvis, so the tech sweep must be OK so far.

"Na Stark has, or at least, *I* think he has, a sub-preference for fellow extreme omegas," Rowland says. "Captain, have you read the research about Klennecky 8 omegas?"

"I have not," Steve says gravely. He's only read the research on 8.5, Tony's subtype.

"They do best in traditional marriages," Rowland says. He looks at Steve, seems to balance what he wants to say. "Na Stark was raised at an all-O school. Did you know?"

"Yes," Steve says. "It seems to have been a positive experience."

"Yes," Rowland says. He takes a long drag, and he doesn't cough, so he must smoke at least occasionally. "I think it's one of the reasons he was able to recover. The recovery rate for sexual trauma, especially in the more sensitive high-scoring types, is very dependent on an omega being able to stay someplace they feel is safe, regardless of the actual safety. He'd have been better off, physically, in an omega trauma specialty hospital, but his physicians kept him at school because he felt safe there."

Steve knows he's giving off enough pheromones to choke a dead horse, so he inhales smoke and tries not to imagine killing Rowland for even discussing his mate's trauma and recovery. "I'm going to tell you something, agent, something that I think you need to understand before we go any further."

"All right," Rowland says.

"Have you heard the term 'social capital'?" Steve asks.

"Yes," Rowland says, surprised. "It's a bit like the emotional bank account. Why?"

"Because like it or not, your social capital with Na Stark is very low." Steve looks at the trees, and it reminds him of Germany. "You were quite insulting to Sa Richardson, for instance."

"I...regret that," Rowland says. He frowns. "I should have been more nuanced. I know that he's an important figure in Na Stark's life."

"Mm," Steve says. "You also came to Na Stark in a place he normally feels safe, the engine repair area, and you brought with you topics that make him feel very unsafe."

"I intended the locale to make it easier for him to talk about those topics," Rowland says.

"Your intention backfired. Na Stark, like many of us, divides his worlds. Engines are supposed to be safe. Don't make them unsafe without his permission."

"You did," Rowland says.

Steve looks at him and smiles. Sa Richardson would recognize the smile, even if Rowland does not. Sa Richardson would probably go straight for his gun. "No, agent, I did not. Do you know why I went to that engine bay? Do you know why I buried myself cock deep in Tony Stark's throat?"

Rowland smells of fury, but that's OK. "Because you're the leader of the team, and it's your right."

"Wrong," Steve says. He crushes the cigarette on the heel of his boot and carefully tucks the butt into his pocket--Sa Richardson told him to avoid leaving DNA evidence behind him. "I did it because Na Stark asked me to."

And Steve has the pleasure of seeing Agent Rowland speechless.

Steve looks back at the trees, smiling a little. "He asked me to, so I did. You see, Agent, I believe that Na Stark is a very capable, very brilliant individual. I would have preferred to handle the Fight instincts in some other fashion, but I felt that my making choice on behalf of Na Stark would be disrespectful."

"Are you serious?"

"Very." Steve looks him in the eye. "I gave the decision over to Tony. It's his body, so it's his choice."

"Then it's not because you're the team leader?"

"It's not because I'm the team leader," Steve says. "Look agent, you want to provide more supportive handling of Shield's only omega field operative. I respect that. But you need to treat Na Stark with respect."

"But I have been respecting him," Rowland says.

"Nope. From where I'm sitting, you've done nothing but patronize him or hurt him."

"I haven't hurt him," Rowland says, outraged. "I made his comfort the number one priority when your illness was disclosed to me."

"So that's why he had the panic attack," Steve says. "You made him so comfortable."

"It's not--" Rowland grimaces. "Captain, you have to know that handling a sensitive omega like Na Stark can come with a number of ups and downs."

"I see," Steve says. "So, it's Tony's fault."

"No," Rowland says. He sounds abashed at last. "He misunderstood my intentions. I think that if I clarify with him, he'll--"

"You can't clarify with him, because he isn't speaking to you." Steve lets that sink for a little bit.

Rowland is staring down at his own hands.

"Look," Steve says, as if he's taking pity on him. "Na Stark is about the smartest person in the world. Here's what we're going to do if you're going to keep being our handler."

Rowland waits, and his shoulders are military-erect.

"You are going to back way off. Na Stark's doctor told me that Na Stark needs calm and low stress. We're going to give him that. For now, you don't speak to Na Stark without another operative present. Not just any Shield agent, but one of the people I appoint."

"But--"

"*He is afraid of you*," Steve says patiently. Rowland's expression falls. "For now, you don't speak to him without someone else present."

"All right," Rowland says. "I hadn't realized he was quite that upset. I thought that once he'd cooled off..."

Steve doesn't want to tell Rowland that it's only Tony's intervention that the man is alive, but Rowland does need to understand the seriousness of this breach. Because next time, Steve will not bother with promises. He'll just kill Rowland and be done with it.

"I am going to be honest with you," Steve says. He puts as much dominance in his voice as he can--life or death, do or die. "If you had displayed that kind of behavior to an omega in my old pack, you would not have driven them to a panic attack. Do you know why?"

Rowland frowns, and Steve lets the silence hang between them, tense as silk cord strung across a road in an ambush.

After a time, Rowland says softly, "At first, I thought you were trying to tell me something about the nature of your omegas, about the way anxiety was handled back then, but I have read all of the reports on the Howling Commandos. Some of the omegas in your pack were likely prone to the same sort of trauma responses Na Stark displays."

"Yes," Steve says simply. Not to such an extent, maybe, but yes.

"I confess that I don't know what the difference might be, except that you likely did not leave the omegas alone."

"Oh, sometimes they went off on their own adventures," Steve says. He isn't planning to tell Rowland their stories, but he suspects Alex would enjoy hearing about how the omegas acquired Kirsten. "Would you like me to explain?"

"Yes," Rowland says, as if it's costing him.

Steve should probably feel bad for the man, but he just doesn't. Any halfway aware alpha should have smelled the fear and panic coming off Tony and responded with compassion and protection. "All of the omegas in my pack understood their role and their value, not to the military, but to the pack itself. You're scoffing, I can see it, and that's OK. It was a different time. But back then, you'd never have panicked one of ours, because they'd have known they could call for us, and we'd have come."

Rowland frowns again, like he's thinking this through. "You're saying that Na Stark needs the protection of his pack, but at the same time, you're saying that I'm condescending."

"Na Stark does not need the protection of his pack," Steve says, watching the cloudy gray sky. "He is fully capable of protecting himself, as were my omegas. Ezra and Jolene between them probably had higher kill counts than I did. But, they knew that some kinds of problems were...beneath their notice. "

Rowland blinks, and Steve can smell that the man is slightly offended.

"Bucky used to like to handle this sort of thing, back in the day," Steve says, and he feels a bit wistful about it. Buck had so enjoyed smashing his fist into idiots' noses. "It's not that Na Stark can't deal with you, it's that he should not have to bother. I am telling you this so that you understand who will be handling the problem should it arise again."

"You?" Rowland asks, and it comes out a sneer. Steve can smell the self-defense, and after the way the world now views omega-alpha relations, Steve's not surprised. "Or I suppose you'll let Barton do it. He is your beta."

"Agent Barton is certainly an admirably competent beta, and I'm grateful to have him. But no. I don't plan to ask Barton to deal with it."

Rowland looks confused, but that's just as well. Steve is going to keep the name up his sleeve until the end of the conversation. It's time to change the subject, allow the casual threat to hang in the air between them.

"Now then," Steve says, "if you want to guide Na Stark, especially in personal matters, you need to work on your social capital. As far as Tony's concerned, you waltzed into his world and started swinging your big alpha dick around in his personal business without so much as a by your leave."

Rowland grimaces, but Steve isn't going to take the words back. They're true.

"You're going to listen to what Na Stark says, and unless there is a direct compelling evidence-based reason, you are going to do what he says."

"But research suggests that submissive omegas find comfort in--"

"No," Steve says, and he's struggling to keep his patience.

"But--"

"Are you sleeping with Na Stark?"

"No!"

"Then he is not submissive to you," Steve says. "Besides, just because Na Stark likes to be on the bottom in bed doesn't mean we don't all wash our hands before coming to the breakfast table. He'll smack your hand with the flat of his knife, Klennecky 8 or no Klennecky 8, if your hands are anything but squeaky clean at his breakfast table."

Rowland looks like he can't quite picture this, but he seems determined to add, "Captain, just so you understand, not all Klennecky 8s are submissive."

"Do you understand my point?" Steve asks.

"Yes, but--" Rowland shuts his mouth again and he looks as if he is earnestly thinking about what Steve said.

Steve looks at the dark forest looming around them. It would make a splendid setting for one of the more old fashioned children's stories. The kind where witches boil human bones. "Na Stark has not been well treated by Shield."

Rowland doesn't say anything. What can the man say?

"He deserves better," Steve says.

"Yes," Rowland says quietly. "He does. I'm sorry that I've been part of the problem. I'll think about what you've said, Captain. I know you didn't have to talk to me about this in this way, so thank you."

Now Steve does feel bad for him. It's annoying. "There's something else, Agent, that we need to deal with before I send you back to field HQ."

"Oh?" Rowland looks at him curiously.

"I understand that SHIELD wants me to get this Fight instinct under control, but I'd like you to communicate to your superiors that I don't appreciate the way this issue has been handled. I'll arrange my own solution, in my own way."

"Captain," Rowland says, and he sounds wary now. "I realize it does seem a bit Big Brother, but given the gravity of the situation...."

"I don't get that reference, but if you mean it seems a bit pushy, heavy handed, and unhelpful, then you're right. It does."

"I'm not sure you fully understand my intention in handling it the way I did," Rowland says. He holds up a hand before Steve can protest. "I know it seems like I was a jerk, but hear me out."

"I suppose I can do that," Steve says.

"I leaped on the issue as soon as it crossed my desk." Rowland meets Steve's eyes. "I went directly to Na Stark about it, not you, because--"

When Rowland stops, Steve is surprised to smell a whiff of fear. It's very faint, but intense, controlled.

"Whatever you say here, with me, is in confidence," Steve says. And he means it.

Rowland's head droops and he stares at the barren bracken. "I wanted Na Stark to have a voice in the way this issue was dealt with. If I rammed through a solution fast enough, it would mean--"

Oh hell.

Steve grimaces. "Better you solve it, even badly, than have someone else solve it. Is that it?"

"Yes." Rowland looks gray faced and nervous, and it makes Steve wonder what the man knows. "I sincerely believe that the fate of the world may rest on Shield's ability to keep Na Stark stable. You are an important part of his life at the moment."

'At the moment.' Yes, Tony had mentioned that Rowland didn't think Steve was exactly an ideal partner for him. Steve doesn't hold it against Rowland as much as Tony does, though. Tony deserves the best, and Steve doesn't mind someone being smart enough to think that, too.

So long as they accept that Steve will fight to the death to keep Tony.

"Agent, I have mixed feelings about this, but I'm going to take a chance on you." Steve knocks their shoulders together, gently, so he doesn't bowl Rowland off the seat.

Rowland looks up again, surprised. Steve can smell the faint whiff of hope now, a stronger version of Rowland's autumn prairie scent.

"I've invited Alex Richardson to live at Stark House," Steve says, watching Rowland closely.

The surprise deepens, sharpens. "Captain, are you aware that Sa Richardson is a strongly suspected drug trafficker?"

"Yes," Steve says, "I know. Agent Coulson and Agent Barton were kind enough to fill me in."

"I see." Rowland props his elbow on his knee, and for once, the man looks smart enough to be their handler. "You're doing this for Na Stark, aren't you?"

"Yes," Steve says. He has no intention of explaining that it was Tony himself who had invited Alex to come stay.

Rowland nods slowly. "I see. You want to add stabilizing influences."

Steve sighs. "You make it sound cold. They're good friends. Best friends. The world hasn't been too kind to either of them."

Rowland grunts, but Steve can't tell if it's agreement or just a listening noise. Then he says, "I think I should warn you, Captain, about Sa Richardson."

Steve raises his eyebrow.

"Sa Richardson is--" Rowland frowns. "I told you that in your day, he would have been called a boss mare, and that's true. But it's not just that. Some of my informants say that Sa Richardson can kill very efficiently and very coldly. He's ruthless about any interference with his employees, and of course, that's just good business. But..."

"But?"

Rowland seems to weigh his words for a moment, then finally shrugs. "But they also said that anyone who hurts Na Stark has a strange habit of turning up dead."

Steve snorts. "I could have told you that."

"It doesn't seem to bother you," Rowland observes.

"I saw the photos in Na Stark's file," Steve says.

Rowland's nostrils flare, and Steve knows that he must be pouring off violent pheromones like crazy. There's plenty coming off Rowland, too.

Steve looks at the trees again, debates with himself. "I feel that Tony's family betrayed him. His father should have chosen a more appropriate guardian, and his mother should have made sure that Tony had additional social support. Obadiah Stane's reprehensible actions make me ashamed to be an alpha."

Rowland doesn't say anything, but Steve gets the sense that Rowland may feel the same shame Steve feels.

"To my way of thinking, Sa Richardson stepped in and did what any self-respecting alpha head of family would have done. Am I sorry he had to? Yes, but towards him, I feel nothing but gratitude. And to Tony's school, too. Those omegas did better by Na Stark than the police ever did."

Rowland's stiff posture tells Steve that he agrees, and that Rowland hates the system's failure every bit as much as Steve does. But as a part of that system, it's hard to accept the failure.

"I'll tell you, Agent," Steve says. "I'm not sure what to make of you. But you need to understand that Na Stark is a part of my family now. I protect my family."

"So, you're the one who will come after me if I hurt Na Stark," Rowland says.

"Oh no," Steve says. "I might, if you got my temper up, but no, I'm not the one who's going to be guarding our pack's omega."

Rowland turns and looks at him.

The man really must not have dealt with many real packs, because he still looks puzzled. "But you said Barton isn't either."

"That's right," Steve says. "You seem to be under the impression that the position of guardian to the pack's omega is low status. It's not. In fact, protecting the omega is about as high status as it's possible to get, outside being the chief alpha or the head of household."

Rowland's frowning now, but Steve isn't in the mood to wait for that slow penny drop.

"Agent Romanoff asked me whether I would allow her to take on that role. After thinking about it, I agreed."

All the color drains from Rowland's face. "Natasha Romanoff is Na Stark's bodyguard?"

"That's not the word we used back in my day, but close enough, yes." Steve brushes at the frosty bit of leaf that had fallen onto his coat. "She'll be the one who accompanies Na Stark to Shield headquarters when his presence is required. And just so we're clear, this business of conveniently sending Barton or Coulson or Romanoff to Outer Mongolia to keep the team separated as if by accident? That's going to stop."

Rowland is still looking a bit ashen, but he nods.

"I can arrange my own dates, as I said," Steve says, "but if you don't believe me, I'll be happy to take a para-sexual system test at Shield medical on next Friday. You can see whether my own methods are providing me with improvement."

Steve stands up, and Rowland stands, too.

"You head back. I'm going to finish my constitutional."

Rowland gives the chilly and frozen forest a grim look. "See you back at base. Do you need assistance getting back? Do you have your cell phone?"

"No. I ran a scouting team in wartime. I'll be fine."

Rowland moves off into the forest, clearly dubious, and just as clearly following his own clumsy trail to find his way back. Steve hopes they won't have to send out the dogs if he gets lost.

Steve waits, then makes his way deeper into the trees.

After a time, Jarvis says, "All clear, Captain."

"Thank you, Jarvis. Can you put a call through to Sa Richardson for me, please?"

"Certainly."

Steve has the phone out and held up to his face by the time Sa Richardson appears on the screen, looking unusually disheveled and cheerful.

"How did it go, darling?" Sa Richardson's face loses its good humor and he leans forward. "That badly?"

"It's nothing urgent," Steve says, but he can't help it. He can't lie to Sa Richardson. "At least I hope it's not--look. Can you come home early?"

"Right now?"

Oh thank God. Thank God.

Steve is finally dealing with someone who understands how things work. Tony does, too, of course, but it's not the same. Tony's the one at risk. Tony's always at risk, and Tony always downplays that.

"Not right this second, no. I think we're going to be fine, but I'm just concerned."

"Rowland is up to something?"

"I wish I knew," Steve says. He kicks moodily at an icy patch of bark. "I get the feeling he isn't."

"Could be a dupe," Sa Richardson says. "Very popular among Shield higher-ups, using dupes. It's so easy if you have a military-type structure. Following orders and all that."

"Yes," Steve says.

"Now darling, I know you think I'm a bossy bossy bitch, but I do wish you'd tell me what this is all about. I promised not to gut Rowland with a spoon, and you know I don't make those sort of promises lightly."

"If I can't kill him, you can't kill him," Steve says automatically.

"I hardly think that's fair. I can't kill lots of people you're allowed to kill. It's only reasonable I should be able to kill a few you can't."

"Don't pout," Steve says, and then stops, shuts his eyes. Is he really nagging one of his omegas about killing people? Yes, yes, he is.

"Oh fine," Sa Richardson says, even though he does still sound pouty. "I gave you all that security and strategy and you still haven't even told me what he's done."

"I know," Steve says, and he feels rather guilty, but he'd promised Tony that they wouldn't try to use the Rowland mess to pressure Alex to leave Terrence's college preparations.

"Well?" Sa Richardson says.

"Well what?"

"Did it work?" Sa Richardson says. "The least you can do is tell me whether I was right in my advice."

Now he sounds a little sulky, which Steve supposes is more than fair. Sa Richardson did go to an awful lot of trouble. Security arrangements, technology, the strategy of everything from bodylanguage to meeting locales to whether to serve food or drink or have it someplace with a particular ambience.

It's also possible that Sa Richardson is feeling a little hurt that Steve won't tell him what's going on, but that's probably just Steve's overactive imagination.

"You were right," Steve says, glancing around.

"About which part, darling?"

"All of it," Steve says. "But especially about the locale. As soon as I got here, I knew you were right."

"Oh?" Sa Richardson cocks his head curiously.

"This is a great place to dump a dead body, and I should never have told Tony I wouldn't kill Rowland."

Steve's rewarded with Sa Richardson's rich deep laugh.

Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the continued delay in posting. My loved one passed away on April 20, 2014, surrounded by family. Nearly her last words were, "Be happy." If my writing has amused or entertained you, in even a small fashion, I would love it if you took her words to heart: do something, however small, that makes you truly joyful. Life is short: enjoy it!
>
> Today's chapter is a short one, for the purposes of narrative flow, but I shall be posting the second half (Tony's half!), tomorrow.

Steve is more than a little nervous about taking Tony to see Dr Santos. There are just so many ways for this to go badly, and Tony's been hurt enough.

The past couple days have passed in a flurry of worry on Steve's part and frenzied reading on Tony's.

It's all complicated by their decision not to tell Sa Richardson about Steve's para-sexual system problem. Steve doesn't want the omega to feel pressured. Sa Richardson deserves to be courted, and Steve is having enough trouble accepting the snuggle sessions with Honey. It would be painful to think Sa Richardson gave into him just for the sake of Steve's health, especially given what Sa Richardson knows about Steve's old pack.

Still, the research that Tony's read seems to back up Dr Santos. Alphas of Steve's level do better when they have multiple mates. To create an effective protocol, they're going to need to include Sa Richardson.

Tony seems confident it will all work out, but Steve's been spending his nights staring at his ceiling and fretting. If Sa Richardson decides he'd rather not sleep with Steve, there's a good chance that Steve will be stuck with one of the appalling youngsters Shield is so keen on or, at the least, one of Honey's many friends and acquaintances.

None of these thoughts make for a solid night's rest, but finally, it's time for the appointment.

Tony's arranged all of the security, and they're visiting a new building far from the NYU campus. Tony's done something complicated and expensive to NYU's overall IT security, but he doesn't want to tip SHIELD off about how much they know so they'll be seeing Dr Santos in a corporate building full of accountants and web design firms.

Steve and Tony go to the office marked Yardley Design, Ltd. The receptionist doesn't even ask their names, just sends them back to room 4.

Dr Santos is sitting at a low table, reading a file. She looks up. "Good to see you again, Captain."

"Doctor," Steve says, shaking her hand. "I'd like you to meet my partner, Tony Stark."

"Na Stark, a pleasure," she says.

"Likewise," Tony says. He's looking at the second person in the room, a pleasant looking alpha with brown hair and a lab coat like Dr Santos. "You must be Dr Brown."

"Yes, I'm Dr Spenser Brown. Dr Santos asked me to sit in. She often does when she's making up a full protocol."

"It's nice to meet you." Steve shakes Dr Brown's hand. They'd known that Dr Santos would be bringing a typistic sexuality specialist to assist today. As far as Steve can remember, Dr Brown is the one who specializes in couples sexuality counseling.

"My role is to help Captain Rogers create a protocol that will return him to baseline," Dr Brown says. "A lot of people assume that there's a set number of sexual encounters or a set number of orgasms, and then an alpha's para-sexual system will be reset. That's not the case. Some activities provide more healing relief than others. I'll be helping create a protocol that will work positively for the sexual health of all the parties involved."

"I think Steven has to know the people he's snuggling, otherwise he's going to get tense," Tony says, arms crossed. "And I think if he has an orgasm with some stranger, he'll get depressed after."

"I agree," Dr Brown says. "R-5s can have sex with nearly anyone and get benefit. An orgasm is an orgasm for an R-5. Captain Rogers needs the emotional connection. But there are a number of possibilities. Dr Santos, are you ready?"

"Just a sec, Spense," Dr Santos says. She's set her folder aside and begins removing things from a large duffle bag on the table. "OK, Captain, this is going to a give us a firm reading of your responses to certain questions and ideas. It'll let us customize your results better."

"Oh my god," Tony says, peering at the small electrodes and wires Dr Santos has hauled out. "This is one of the porn lie detector tests! On a scale of one to ten, how hot do you find high heels, sir? Oh, a two. Bzzzt, liar! You're a foot fetishist, that readout says nine point nine!"

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Dr Santos says. "Except we don't have pictures of high heels."

Steve tries to edge away from her and her electrodes, but Tony gives him a look. Steve lets her attach the sticky things to his wrist and the inside of his elbow. A sleeve slips over two of his fingers. Steve isn't thrilled, but he's sat through much worse.

Then she brings out a large box and a padded sleeve for his other wrist. It's designed to wrap around his forearm, which is fine, but on the inside are several needles dangling from short lines of tubing.

"What is that?" Steve asks, and if he wasn't already hooked up to her electrodes, he'd back up.

"You have a Thornton machine," Tony says reverently. He's already leaning over, poking at the different tubes and gizmos and dials, while his other hand strokes the casing with the gentle possessive affection Tony sometimes shows his favorite electronics. The gleam in his eye is acquisitive and greedy, like he wants to tuck the horrid thing under his arm and haul it home to play with.

"No, Tony," Steve says firmly. He knows that look.

"But Steven, do you know how rare these are? They're remarkably hard to calibrate, and--"

"We'll talk about it when we're done with the tests," Steve says. "We only have the doctors' time for a couple of hours."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony says, but he's still looking at the machine with longing.

Dr Santos pats the machine affectionately. "This is my baby. I'll show her off after. All right, Captain, let's get you hooked up. Na Stark, Dr Brown is going to run you through the secondary tests while the Captain does this. OK?"

Steve wishes they weren't doing their tests separately. He'd like having Tony close enough to hold hands. Still, they do only have a couple hours. The research Tony did said it sometimes takes weeks of work to create protocols. It would be too hard to dodge SHIELD that whole time.

The real reason they're doing their tests in separate rooms, though, is that being in the presence of a partner makes the tests less accurate. So, separate rooms.

Tony goes to the office next door with Dr Brown, and Steve lets Dr Santos stick him full of needles. The doctor explains that some needles will be testing his blood for various hormones and chemicals, while other needles will inject tiny amounts of test materials and medication.

Then Dr Santos hands him a visor with weird goggles. "This is the fun part. We're going to show you naughty pictures and videos, and we're going to run through some different scenarios. The machines are going to gauge your physical reactions, but I'm also going to ask you verbally."

"You're going to know what I'm seeing?" Steve asks. Jeez.

"Yep. It'll show up on my laptop while you're seeing it in the goggles. In this job, I've seen pretty much everything there is to see. You're not going to shock me, and whatever you like or don't like is OK by me. The best thing you can do is just be honest."

"OK," Steve says.

Oh God. He's going to die of embarrassment before this is over.

"Oh," Dr Santos adds as Steve is putting on the clunky goggles, "Na Stark was kind enough to give us some photos, too, so we've got some personalized ones. Just didn't want it to come as a surprise. All set?"

Without waiting for an answer, the first picture pops up on Steve's view screen. To his relief, it's just a picture of a landscape with a red barn and yellow sun and some text at the bottom. *Please read this sentence aloud if you can view the text*.

Steve dutifully reads the sentence aloud.

"Great," Dr Santos says.

The first picture is a pretty beta girl in a cute outfit posed in classic pinup position--kneeling on a bed, hands behind her head, all sparkly eyes and lush breasts hinted at by the thin blouse.

There's nothing *wrong* with the picture, but compared to Tony in tight jeans on his knees it's pretty tame stuff.

After a few mild pictures, Dr Santos says, "Now that we've got a baseline, I'd like you to start stating how arousing you find the next few pictures or videos. Scale of 1 to 10. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The next few pictures show sex acts, and Steve wonders what's wrong with him that he only finds them mildly arousing.

"Three," he says about a picture of a young man giving head to an older alpha male.

The next picture makes Steve's breath catch.

It's a picture of Tony, but he's much younger. It's candid, not professionally done--maybe even a polaroid, and Steve thinks Alex took the photo.

Tony's wearing a pair of jeans, unbuttoned, and nothing else. He's lying under a tree, and it dapples his skin with shade. His hair is longer, curly and wild and he's clean shaven. There are gray grease stains on his hands and his fingernails are black-half-moons.

His bare feet look oddly vulnerable. Steve can see a few violets in among the lush summer grass.

There's a fresh bite mark on Tony's neck, but it's the smoldering look in his eyes that makes Steve's heart pound. Tony's aroused, meeting the viewer's gaze straight on, but there's also a hint of laughter there. Warmth.

"Ten," Steve says hoarsely. "That's a ten."

"OK," Dr Santos says cheerfully.

The next picture jolts Steve back to what they'd been doing before. There's a male omega on his hands and knees, being fucked from behind by an alpha. It should be arousing, but the too-perfect bodies and the crisp lighting make it seem fake. There's no connection between the lovers. The omega looks like he's imagining a grocery list and the alpha has a mean look in his eye.

"One," Steve says. He feels guilty, but the doctor said not to lie.

He's glad he was honest, because the next picture shows that same alpha putting a gag in the omega's mouth. As if the omega would have dared say a word anyway. "Can I give a negative number?"

"Afraid not, but I'll note it manually."

"I hate gags," Steve mutters.

Fortunately, the doctor changes to a different picture. This time it's much better--an ambiguous omega in high heels, those cross-hatch looking stockings, garter belt, tap pants, and corset. It's the expression of delicate disdain that Steve likes.

Steve relaxes. "Five."

The next round of photos are much the same. Steve gives out fours and fives to pictures of omegas in various get-ups and he gives sixes and sevens to a few pictures of extreme omegas making love to each other.

One picture of two naked omegas is particularly lovely. The omegas are kneeling, facing each other, and both have their wrists bound behind their back. They're each wearing a collar--the blond is wearing a pretty blue-green collar and the dark haired omega is wearing a red-violet collar.

They're just kissing, but there's a sense of closeness, tenderness, passion.

Steve wonders who owns them.

"Captain?"

"What?" Steve asks, jolted.

"Can you give me a number, Captain?"

Steve looks at the picture for a last moment. Tony and Alex would kill him if he tried to tie them like that, but God they'd be beautiful. He'd buy a thin red leather collar for Tony and a deep sea green for Alex. He'd saddle soap and polish the collars so they'd be buttery soft against his omegas' tender necks, and he'd keep the leashes in his hand to enjoy the connection through the leather.

God yes, he'd let them kiss for hours, just like that.

"Nine," Steve admits quietly. "This one's a nine for certain."

The next picture is of the same two omegas. This time, the blond is still kneeling, but now they're leashed to a post on the bed. The dark haired omega head is between the other's legs, giving them head. Both omegas look blissed out.

"Nine," Steve says quickly. His pants are uncomfortably tight.

The picture changes immediately. It's the same two as before, but this picture is shot from the side.

Now the blond omega is bent forward, shoulders resting on the bed, ass in the air, hands still bound. The dark haired omega is draped over their back, biting their neck as they fuck their cock deep inside. Both omegas are still wearing their collars.

This time, you can see a leash attached to the collar of the dark haired omega. The way the leash is angled, Steve knows the owner is holding that leash.

Steve has a sudden heady image of getting Tony to fuck Alex like this. Of holding Tony's leash, of watching them kiss. Of laying Alex down. Of guiding Tony by the collar, of urging him to mount Alex. Of getting to enjoy every noise Alex makes as Tony fucks him.

"Ten," Steve says. His voice sounds wrecked, but good God. "That one's a ten."

The next round of pictures seems staggeringly dull. Alphas fucking omegas in various positions, some of which make Steve's hamstrings wince in sympathy.

It's not until there's a photo of a young male omega in a female alpha's lap that Steve can even get his mind off the secret fantasy he's trying to shove down.

The female alpha is older, her hair streaked gray at the temples. She's wearing a dark blue conservative suit, and she's sitting in a large armchair upholstered in some kind of staid blue tone-on-tone damask.

Her omega is something else altogether.

He's young, with spiky gelled hair and a tattoo peeking out under the sleeve of his tee shirt. His boots are red leather and his jeans are artfully torn in a few places. The necklace he's wearing is a youthful leather choker, but Steve is sure the diamond pendant is quite real.

But it's not the contrast--there have been plenty of older alpha and young omega. That's just the natural way of things.

It's that the young male omega is nipping his alpha's chin, looking up at her with dancing eyes, teasing.

Steve remembers the strange discussion he had with Tony. The way Tony had been so afraid because Alex had sent on that photo. Steve looked it up, and yes, Tony's right. Plenty of people in this age do find the chin-bites to be inappropriately feral. Weirdly, half the people seem to believe the gesture is too submissive and the other half think it's too dominant.

Steve thinks both groups are stupid. Any good omega would nip their chins and tell them to get over themselves and come play.

"Ten," Steve says without having to think about it. "I've always loved that. Ten."

The next picture is the same couple--it must be another series.

The female alpha is still sitting in her armchair. This time, her young male omega is naked except for the leather collar with its flashy diamond. She has him by the hair, his head tipped back to bare his pretty throat.

He's obviously sassing her, and she's just as obviously mock-chiding him for it.

"Nine," Steve says.

In the next, the female alpha is standing, respectable and upright, and her omega kneels naked at her feet--looking up at her with laughing eyes. She's got her forefinger pressed against his lips.

"Nine." Steve hopes the omega will sass her further. Usually, Steve doesn't like the punishment pictures, but these two are playing a game they both love. Steve would enjoy seeing a few pictures of him over her lap or wearing a cock ring or maybe taking a dildo.

He's not expecting the gag.

It's an O-ring gag, and the leather strap is the same dark brown as the omega's collar. The picture of the female alpha putting it into his mouth with mock-force has the same playful air as the others, but Steve feels oddly upset all the same.

She looks assured, confident, and pretend exasperated at her bratty O. He looks naughty as he tries to pull away from her grip on his jaw as she forces his mouth open.

The omega doesn't just look playful. He looks aroused, and his cock is now beautifully hard.

"Captain? What's your number for this one?"

Steve stares at the picture and wishes he knew. "I have no idea."

Dr Santos doesn't argue or press, thank God. She moves on to the next, but it's just as bad. Maybe worse.

Now the young omega is wearing the O-ring gag. His mouth is held open by it, the steel circle gleaming. His alpha is holding him by the hair, but she seems to be standing a little behind him. Showing him off.

He is beautiful, with the spiky dark hair and the laughing eyes and the pretty cock all flushed and ready.

"This one switches to video at this point," Dr Santos says, before Steve can figure out a number.

Steve immediately figures out why it's video.

The omega is just as noisy with the gag as he must be without it. His alpha tips his head back further and he moans, making lovely wordless sex noises.

She's still standing behind him and he turns his head to rub his cheek against her, whimpering and moaning.

"I know," she croons. Her manicured nails stroke through his spiky hair, disarranging his careful hairstyle. "But you need it, don't you?"

He moans at the touch, loud and wanton, and her hands roam over his neck and shoulders, then up to his cheeks to caress the planes of his face.

"You are so shameless," she says. "What am I going to do with you?"

He turns his face so he can rub his open gagged mouth against her fingers and hand.

She laughs softly. "All right, you brat. Come on." She sits down in her chair and her omega climbs into her lap. There's no way to read it as anything but eager and happy and playful. The noises he makes around the gag are just as cheerful, and all the more erotic for being wordless.

Steve feels flushed and embarrassed as he watches the alpha kiss him full on the mouth, tipping his head back with her manicured hands, taking complete control. He moans and shivers and trembles, as needy and submissive as Tony.

Steve knows she's working his cock with her other hand, can see that the camera's captured the way her fingers stroke it and then dip down to toy with his balls and his wet entrance. Steve should watch that, but all he can look at is the way she's kissing his gagged mouth.

It's not long before her omega starts to come. She stops kissing him, and Steve listens to his wordless noises. His mouth moves like he would say words, but can't, and there's something erotic about that, too.

Steve both wishes it was over and that he could see it again.

When the omega's orgasm is done, his alpha doesn't take the gag off, as Steve expects. She just tells him how good he was, how beautifully he behaved for her, how proud she is of him. He murmurs back, still wordless, and then tucks his nose into her neck, dropping off to sleep almost at once. The video ends with his alpha holding him close and murmuring words of love.

Steve has to clear his throat twice. "Eight," he says at last. "I'm sorry, but if I'm honest--that's an eight."

"We always want you to be honest, kiddo. OK, next."

Thankfully, he's plunged back into the mundane world of what Steve's favorite online alpha support forum calls 'fucking and sucking'. Basic sex acts performed in various positions and

with genders swapped about for interest. Steve gives out threes and fours without worrying too much about any of it.

There are four more videos, one of an alpha come-marking his female omega (seven), and three of alpha-beta couples making love to an omega (threes).

Steve's almost getting bored when he's hit with another shock.

It's a picture of Alex, but not an Alex that Steve's seen before. It's a close-up, just his face and shoulders, but Steve is rapt.

His hair must have been longer once, because it's shoulder length here, with summery gold highlights in the usual rich brown. The light is dappled, as if the picture was taken outside, and the backdrop is the bark of a tree--oak, from the looks of it.

The Alex here is young--he doesn't have the guarded look of a predator. In fact, he looks sweet. Sweet and pretty and innocent, eyes alight with warmth, and somehow, Steve is sure that this is a candid photo that Tony took, years ago, and keeps still, of his best friend back when they still had hopes of different lives, different futures.

"I can't give that one a number," Steve says quietly. "It wouldn't be right."

"If you say so," Dr Santos says.

Steve's relieved to discover that it's easier to number the rest of the pictures. He gives twos and threes to the boring pinups, four and fives to the sexy omegas sprawled in various sultry poses, a seven to a photo of Alex in a suit sitting in a formal parlor, an eight to Tony lounging on his car in nothing but jeans and a wrench, a nine to a video of a female alpha carefully biting and sucking marks into each part of her omega's most sensitive spots.

He gives only one more ten. The video is short and a little blurry, but it's of Tony and Alex, tipsy as sailors, coming out of a dance club, dolled to the nines.

Tony's wearing those low cut leather pants and a shirt that barely deserves the name. He's wearing the smoky eye makeup, and his hair looks mussed. He executes a few dance steps and twirls.

Alex is wearing a pair of pants that lace up the sides, and his silky gray shirt is perfectly see-through. He does a little hip swivel maneuver that Steve's seen Honey execute, all slink and seduction. It's sexy as hell--until he trips on his own feet and crashes into Tony, who crashes into some passerby.

The passerby mutters darkly, but Alex and Tony are too busy laughing.

They're clinging to each other, and suddenly, the mood shifts from laughter to something else. Then they're kissing.

All tongue and teeth and moans.

Then the passion changes to something less desperate and more tender.

Steve could watch it forever. Alex has one hand cupping the back of Tony's head, not even caressing his sensitive neck, and the other wrapped around his waist, stroking the band of skin above Tony's waist with his thumb.

Tony's not just kissing back, but sometimes taking over, biting at sensitive places on Alex's neck and jaw until Alex throws his head back.

Steve watches with interest when Tony tips Alex's head to the side and scrapes his teeth over the skin just behind Alex's ear. Alex growls low in his throat and his fingers clench on Tony's waist.

Tony keeps doing it, and Alex's fingers grip and release like a cat flexing its claws. His eyes are closed and his breathing is ragged. Tony pulls away a little and kisses the spot instead, and Alex makes a low needy noise.

He's going to come--Steve is sure of it, and Tony must know exactly what he's doing. Tony has that glittery expression he gets when he's leaping off buildings or blowing things up.

Alex is nearly there, eyes closed, as Tony kisses and bites that spot behind his ear again and again.

Suddenly, some passerby shouts something unintelligible and wolf-whistles.

It's probably as much for Alex and what they're doing as it is for Tony, but Alex whips his head around and *snarls*, teeth bared and flashing white.

Even knowing it's a video, Steve jolts in surprise. Alex is really not kidding.

Steve doesn't need to wait. "Ten. That's a ten."

The last few pictures don't much compare, but Steve obediently grades them all.

At last, Dr Santos tells him he's done with that part. He can get rid of the goggles, and Steve's looking forward to taking off the uncomfortable arm cuffs. Unfortunately, she just plops the laptop in front of him instead.

"You need to read the text on the screen and mark each of the scenarios with the mouse on a scale of 1 to 10," Dr Santos says.

At least this time he doesn't have to say anything out loud.

Steve's relief lasts until he reads the first scenario, where the words seem to blaze off the screen into his mind. *I would like to hold Tony down and mark his neck until everyone knows he's mine.*

"I can't answer these," Steve says. If he does, he may be sleeping on the couch for the rest of his natural life. However short that lasts, since the next question is *Alex should have my children and no one else's.*

Dr Santos looks up from her own laptop. "What did I tell you about being firm, last time?"

"I know, but don't you think some of these are a little--disrespectful?"

"They're sexual fantasies, kiddo. Lots of sex fantasies are inherently disrespectful. Don't worry about it. You just answer honestly, and then we'll use the results to figure out what would work the best for your system. What you decide to do about the results is up to you."

Steve looks at the screen again. Some of the questions aren't too bad. *I would like Tony and Alex to sleep in my bed.* And *I like my partners to wear clothing that smells like me.* Or even, *I feel good when I provide for Tony and Alex.* Those are nice. Safe.

"I suppose," Steve says. He gives two and threes to the questions that make him uncomfortable and gives tens to the ones that feel better.

The laptop makes an odd buzzing sound and the screen shimmers.

Dr Santos looks over and sighs. "Oh boy."

Steve looks at the laptop. "Did I hit the keys too hard?" He still sometimes forgets his own strength.

She gets up and rustles over, tapping a few keys of her own. "No. You lied. If your answers suddenly start falling too far outside your own statistical pattern, the program thinks you got confused or bored, hitting answers at random, or having the wrong screen up."

"It knows what I like?" Steve says, horrified.

The doctor gives him a look. "It does now. That's the point. Besides, it's tracking your biochemistry, remember? Just answer honestly."

Steve hunches his shoulders, feeling trapped. He doesn't want to answer honestly. He wants to make his lovers happy. It's one thing to like to watch other people do something, it's another to say out loud that he wants Tony to do something, or Alex.

"Let me give you a little advice." The doctor pats his shoulder. "Your Na Stark seems like a nice boy. He's had a rough time, but Dr Brown's going to help him out. You want to make him feel safe, and that's laudable. But he's an omega, and he's going to want to make you feel good in the bedroom. Pretending you don't like him isn't going to do him any favors either."

"I don't want to pretend I don't like him. I just don't want to ask him for anything he's not comfortable giving me."

She sighs. "Captain, you're getting ahead of yourself here. This series of tests is just a way to gauge what's most effective for you. It doesn't mean you have to do anything, either of you. Right?"

"I guess," Steve says.

She sits down in the chair next to him and points to one of the questions on the screen. *Alex should have my children and no one else's.* "We take your answers and group them based on patterns. For some people, a ten here would indicate pregnancy is effective, but for others, a

ten would indicate that they're possessive. Even if you marked a ten on this one, all it would say is that pregnancy or possessive actions are effective. You and your partners decide which possessive actions you're all comfortable with--maybe it would be wearing your jewelry or taking your name, maybe it would be marking, maybe it would be attending your work social functions."

"I guess," Steve says again. That doesn't sound so bad.

"Take it from an old lady who's been married nearly forty years. Honesty is the only basis for a happy marriage. They're gonna figure you out sooner or later. Better sooner."

Steve does believe that. He shouldn't hide from his mates, so he squares his shoulders. "I'm sorry. I'll do better."

She pats his shoulder. "Buck up, kiddo. It's sex, not a firing squad."

Sure. But are her prospective mates experts in munitions, explosions, poisons, and firearms?

Steve sighs and goes back to answering the scenarios as honestly as possible.

Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the lovely comments, everyone!

A couple of quick notes: Where did I get the tests? I made it all up, muahahaha. Ahem. Basically, this is what I imagined a para-sexual researcher would be doing, if alpha para-sexual systems existed. Later on in the story, I'll have a detailed description of the Klennecky scores, including what Tony's are and what they mean.

Second, I was asked if it's OK to use ideas or characters from my story in another story. Yep. I believe in transformative works, so it's fine by me. I'd love it if you made a note in your story notes field, saying where you got the idea, mostly because I just think it's really neat that someone would want to use an idea of mine that way.

Third, I'm not sure when the next post will be up. It's a little complicated, and I want it to be right.

Fourth, I'm thinking of sticking up a glossary of drugs, words, and concepts. Would that be helpful?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony had been sort of looking forward to this appointment. Finally, a problem where being Slut of the Century is going to come in handy.

Of course, life is not that kind.

Especially his life.

Dr Brown turns out to be both competent and progressive. Sure, the guy uses a ton of jargon (Alex would say it's to make the alphas feel better), but Tony's perfectly capable of translating that shit. He's spent enough evenings at Alex's dinner parties to be able to talk Alphaistic Paradigm and Om-Focused Sexuality and Biological Imperative Derived Social Hierarchical Impulse.

Unfortunately, that means that Tony can understand exactly what Dr Brown is saying.

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose. "So, you're saying the E-types get the most benefit from sleeping overnight with their partners, monogamous relationships, and being the first to take someone's virginity."

"Yes," Dr Brown says, beaming. "An admirable summary."

Fucking *hell*.

Well, that pretty much rules Tony out, doesn't it?

"Of course," Dr Brown adds, probably to make Tony feel better, "there are always variants within types."

"Not enough variants," Tony mutters. Jesus, you'd think being a world-class fucktoy would count for something around here.

"Now, before the Captain returns, I'd like a chance to speak with you about your other partner."

Tony slumps in his seat. The one he's fucked over for the past decade? Yeah, great, let's do that. "Sure."

"This is a bit of a delicate question, Na Stark, but I hope that our discussion together has given you enough information about me to establish a small level of trust."

Tony straightens, frowning. "I'm not a trusting sort of person. No offense."

The doctor doesn't take offense, which is, frankly, pretty damn unusual. "I'm sorry. Of course. Then I'll just go ahead and ask my question, and you can either answer or not, as you think best. Even if you decide against answering, I hope it's a question that you'll consider privately."

Tony raises an eyebrow. This better not be another damn attempt to get him to break up with Steve. He's fucking sick of it. And if the doctor tries to get him to break up with Alex....

Dr Brown's eyes are mild, gentle, and he looks a bit like a Muppet with his poufy hair and his oversize hipster glasses. "You've been in a mostly-exclusive relationship with Na Richardson for many years."

"He did get *married*," Tony points out. Does everyone fucking forget about that?

"Yes," Dr Brown says, and he seems concerned. Fucking finally, someone sees sense. "I'm a bit surprised by that, given your respective types.

Take that, Alex. "I was a bit surprised myself," Tony says. "What's your question?"

Dr Brown looks like he's trying to find a way to politely phrase something. At last, he says, "I wonder, Na Stark, if Na Richardson understands that you're possessive?"

Tony stares at him. "What?"

"Have you told Na Richardson that you're possessive?"

"I'm not possessive," Tony says. The idea is ludicrous. "I mean, I did feel a little, you know, jealous, but he did marry someone else."

"That would disconcert many people," Dr Brown agrees gravely. "But it makes me wonder whether Na Richardson failed to understand that you're possessive."

"But I'm not possessive," Tony says. Again. But yes, OK, logically...if he wasn't possessive at all, he'd have been fine with the marriage. "Fine. Maybe I'm a little possessive. Why do you ask?"

"Would you like to strengthen your relationship with Na Richardson?"

Tony crosses his arms. "I think Alex would like that."

"Na Stark, I can only help you if you're willing to be honest and open with me. If you avoid answering my questions, I'll be working off incorrect information."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony says. He knows that. He just doesn't like admitting the truth. To anyone. "Look, Alex and I haven't been as close we used to be. I told him I missed him."

"You'd like to return to the closeness you shared before?" Dr Brown asks.

Tony shrugs one shoulder, feeling stiff. "Yeah. I'm not going to be as good for him as Terr was, but I'm going to try. I know everyone thinks I'm the world's biggest asshole, but I want him back." Taking a very deep breath, and heartily glad Steve is not here, and that Alex isn't either, Tony adds, "I would like to strengthen our relationship, yes."

"Thank you," Dr Brown says. "Na Stark, I've worked with a number of omega couples like yourself and Na Richardson."

Tony's gaze sharpens. "You have?"

"Yes," Dr Brown says. He sets aside his folder. "It's one of the reasons I wanted to speak to you privately while the Captain was getting his testing done."

"You think if Alex and I get together, it's going to hurt Steve," Tony says flatly.

"On the contrary. My experience has been that a strongly paired omega couple is a very satisfying pairing for a high level alpha. In fact, when Dr Santos asked me my initial thoughts on helping a depleted E-9, my first recommendation was to search for a match with an appropriate pair."

Maybe Tony's not so crazy, after all.

It also means...

Tony looks down at the desk, his heart pounding. "Years ago, when we were kids, Alex asked--"

"He asked what, Na Stark?"

Tony's mouth is so dry he has a hard time speaking. "Alex asked his parents for a contract with me."

"Oh, Na Stark." Dr Brown sounds so gentle.

"Yeah." Tony has to look away. "It's--even Alex's parents shot that down. I mean, who contracts their omega kid to another omega anyway? But they suggested...." God, it's hard to say. His voice cracks a little when he gets the words out. "Alex said his parents suggested contracting us out together. A dual contract, for a couple months."

"What happened to prevent that?" Dr Brown asks.

Tony hunches in on himself, shivering a little. He hasn't let himself think about this since he and Alex talked all that time ago. "Obie. My guardian. I guess he said no. See, in between Fromm and the, you know, the third marriage, I ended up in a contract with this couple. In Europe. It went--it went OK, you know? I mean, fucking them didn't rock my world, but it was fine, and I--after that, after that is when Alex asked his parents for me."

"Na Stark, I am so sorry to hear your guardian refused to consider it." The doctor sounds sympathetic, genuine.

"I guess he couldn't have made enough money off it," Tony says bitterly. If it brought in decent cash, Obie'd have pimped Tony with Alex before arranging the third marriage. Why waste the chance to make a fast buck?

"Oh, Na Stark," Dr Brown says, and this time his voice is wry and knowing. "Your guardian could have made a great deal of money off such a contract."

"I wasn't a virgin," Tony says, looking up.

"I don't wish to downplay the earnings of your virginity contract, but you must know that your primary value on the marital market is your Roanoke lineage. That will have been worth far more than any virginity--I'm surprised you were given in a pleasure contract at all."

Yes, but--they'd needed Fromm's good will, not just anyone's.

Hadn't they?

"You said your school instructed you in the varying factors that go into dowry and marital negotiations?"

"Oh, yeah, they did," Tony says, brain still picking at the problem of Obie. "But it was pretty general. They knew we were going to be passed out like cattle by our families, and hey, it was probably kinder to be honest about that than pretend like we'd have a real say in who we had to fuck."

"I see. Part of the usual marital negotiation process is outlining both wished for activities and creating limits. Most contracts, for instance, will address the leashing of the omega. The alpha side will ask for their ideal scenario, and the omega side will usually include their ideal limits--leashed nudity at the alpha's home, but not the workplace is a common limit."

Not common enough. Tony's virginal body had been ogled by several DC staffers who went on to become politicians themselves. It was always delightful to run into Representative

Windham, for instance, whose gaze always lingered on Tony's crotch like he was hoping to see Tony half-hard and wet.

God, Tony hates the lot of them.

"We will be discussing limits," Dr Brown goes on, "but I find it helpful to build from the positive. I'd like to try a small exercise. I'm going to ask you to imagine a time when you were with Na Richardson, together, and you felt especially close. I'd like you to describe that time to me, tell me a little about the context. We're looking for a moment of warmth and intimacy--it doesn't necessarily have to be a particularly memorable event."

Tony grimaces a little. It's not that he doesn't have moments of togetherness with Alex. It's not even that he doesn't see the point of the exercise. The doc wants to know what the good times looked like, so he can find ways to recreate that with Steve.

It's just that those moments are, well, private.

"Na Stark?" the doctor asks softly.

Tony looks up.

"Would you rather not share that information with me?"

"It's fine," Tony says, looking away from the doctor's gaze. "You know that I went to school with Alex, right?"

"Yes."

"My first marriage--it kind of fucked me up." Tony hates talking about it, but it's important. Especially now. "I had a hard time getting off, afterward."

The doctor doesn't ask how this is supposed to relate to Tony's happy memory, and Tony's grateful. He's getting there, he is, but he has to work up to it.

"Before--before that asshole, I used to get off pretty easily. Really easily, actually. Stupidly, ridiculously easily." Looking back, Tony's kind of appalled at himself. "But after, not so much."

"Did you not care for sex?" Dr Brown asks, as if he's merely curious. "Avoid it?"

Tony snorts. "Hell no. I was desperate for it. There I was, still shell-shocked and shaky, and my creepo guardian's got me a sex shrink, and in the middle of the night, I sneak down the hall, and I pick Alex's lock, and--"

"And?"

"And I climbed into Alex's bed." Tony meets the doctor's eyes. "Right under his covers. I told myself I was going to blow him. Sort of a 'sorry I got married' apology blowjob. But when I was close, I didn't want to."

"So what did you do?"

It's fucking embarrassing, is what it is. "I curled up by his feet."

The doctor smiles, and he looks fond. "That's lovely, Na Stark."

"I don't know why the hell I picked that memory," Tony mutters. "It's not like I've ever been very sane, but that was kind of fucked up, even for me."

"Did you feel close to Na Richardson when you were there?" Dr Brown asks.

Tony shrugs and looks away. "Yeah."

"What about Na Richardson? Do you think he enjoyed having his submissive close by?"

It's strange to hear someone say it. Sure, some of Alex's wilder underground friends talk that way about their own lovers, but no one has ever acknowledged that Tony is Alex's. Not like that.

Not here, at any rate.

"Na Stark?" the doctor asks gently.

Tony fiddles with a pen he stole from the desk for another long minute. "I thought he didn't even know I was there. I snuck out in the morning, before anyone else got up. But the next night, I sort of did it again. Kept doing that. Then I talked to the sex shrink about it."

"What did she say?"

"She said that it's OK to seek comfort from friends, but that it sounded like I was getting dependent," Tony admitted. "That I was getting inappropriately attached."

Dr Brown winces.

"You don't think so?" Tony asks curiously.

"What did Na Richardson do when you stopped sneaking into his room?"

"Who says he did anything?"

"Na Stark," the doctor says.

"Yeah, fine. OK, so maybe Alex snuck into my room and poked me. He's got long bony fingers and he can poke really hard." Tony can still remember the gleam of Alex's eyes in the dark room. "He's poking me and he says, 'You're taking forever. If you needed help with your English paper, you could have just said. Now we'll both be tired tomorrow. Come on, scoot down, I need my beauty rest.'"

The doctor laughs.

Tony ducks his head, smiles shyly. It had been such an Alex thing to do.

"Na Richardson sounds like an admirable partner," Dr Brown says, when he's done laughing. His voice is warm, and he has a citrusy green tea alpha scent that's almost nice. "Did you return to sleeping at the foot of his bed?"

"Yeah," Tony whispers. "I did. I know I wasn't supposed to, I know it set me back in recovery, but when I slept there, the nightmares weren't so bad."

"Na Stark," Dr Brown says, "I'd like to recommend that we discuss this as part of the couples counselling. For now, I want to assure you about something. Sleeping near him wasn't a sign of dependence then, and it wouldn't be a sign of dependence now."

Tony crosses his arms. "You sound very sure about that."

"I am. One of the first recommendations I make for submissive omegas who've suffered trauma, of any kind, is the Snyder sleep protocol. Ideally, the submissive would sleep with a long-term dominant partner, but other trusted friends or relatives can do it instead, if need be."

Tony frowns, narrows his eyes. "What the hell is the Snyder sleep protocol? Why haven't I heard of it?"

"It's a series of sleeping positions and bedtime rituals, sub-divided for each of the types and various personality groups. One of the recommendations for submissive omegas is sleeping curled at the foot of the bed of their dominant partner. Another is for the dominant partner to let the submissive have the bed, and the dominant partner remains awake to keep watch, or sleeps by the door, sometimes armed."

Tony thinks of his nest, built deep under the bowels of the earth, sunk into granite, shielded from everyone. "I don't like to have people near me when I sleep."

Dr Brown sits back, eyes Tony thoughtfully, taps his pen absently against his paper. "And yet, Captain Rogers' paperwork specifically references how revelatory he found the photos of you, asleep in Na Richardson's bed."

"That's just Alex," Tony says hastily. "He doesn't count."

Then he wishes he could kick himself in the teeth. God, if Alex heard him say that, he'd be so hurt.

"Yes, I've had submissive omega patients say similar things about their dominant omega partners."

"Right before the dom walks out the door, right?" Tony asks.

"Tell me, Na Stark, did your therapist discourage your relationship with Na Richardson on the grounds that it would render you unsuitable for a 'real' relationship?"

Tony flinches. "It's not--look, my primary sexual preference is for alphas, OK?"

"Is it?"

"I'm not giving up Steve!"

"Na Stark, shh, I'm not suggesting anything of the kind. I'm merely offering an alternate interpretation of sexual preferences. Have you ever read the literature on sexually submissive omegas with your Klennecky score?"

No, because Tony's thrown away every single article his research-pusher boyfriend has tried to pawn off on him. Tony just grunts.

"One theory that I have found relevant for my patients with your scores is that they will partner with another omega, ideally a dominant one, but a moderate if they can't find a dominant. Rather than think of themselves as partnered, in the completed romantic pairing sense, the submissive will think of their dominant partner as their other half."

"Wait," Tony says slowly. "Are you telling me that other couples would do like Alex tried to do--get married *together*?"

"Yes, Na Stark. It's not at all unusual for the submissive omega to choose the alphas to contract with, and the dominant to arrange for the contract negotiations."

"You said that if Alex and I were to pimp ourselves out on the open marriage market, we'd have lots of offers," Tony says.

"I dislike the word pimp used in relation to what should be--" Dr Brown seems to give up on correcting Tony's language. "Yes, Na Stark, I believe you would have many offers."

Then why the fuck had Obie turned down the Richardsons?

Had he been planning his coup already?

Or had he known that if Alex had gone with Tony, the Richardsons wouldn't have allowed the brutal rape of their beloved child to go unprosecuted? Or maybe Obie had--

Tony has a flash of memory, slick and dark and queasy, warm hands and moist sounds and the scent of blood and semen, blurred with the image of Alex, pouting under their shared tree because Tony's leaving to get himself fucked by some old geezer. Tony'd kissed Alex until Alex melted against him, murmured 'Come back soon, darling.'

The thought of Alex, his Alex, touched by those damp sweaty hands or tied by those ropes, ill with the drugs, sticky with blood-tinged slick, belly aching from the pregnancy--

"*Na Stark*."

It's not his name, but the sound of a hand slapping the table that jolts Tony out of it.

Heart racing, neck chilly with sweat, Tony stares at the doctor. The guy still looks like a Muppet, with that bristly poufy hair and ridiculous glasses, the sloppy lab coat and too-shiny tie.

"Na Stark," Dr Brown says softly. He's hovering his hand over the desk, palm flat, ready to make another sharp noise if he needs to. "Please recite your location, what we're doing here, who I am."

Tony closes his eyes, but he flinches them open again immediately. "We're on the 32nd floor of the building, in the offices of Yardley Design, Ltd, some mediocre web design firm that Pepper bought. We're talking because Steve's alpha system is stroking out, and you guys are going to fix it."

"With your help," Dr Brown says.

"Yeah," Tony says. "With my help. You're Dr Spenser Brown, undergrad Michigan State, med school at Johns Hopkins, currently faculty at NYU and Yale, conjointly, in typistic sexuality medicine, with a subspecialty in psychiatry."

"Very good, Na Stark." Dr Brown stops hovering his hand. "Did your doctor prescribe any anti-anxiety medication?"

"Shouldn't take it," Tony says, tipping his head back. "Too soon after the last use."

"I see." The doctor doesn't press. He gives Tony a while to collect himself, then says, "You've done very well today."

"Flipping out counts as doing very well, does it?"

"Na Stark, given your personal trauma history, I think you've made remarkable progress, but I'm hearing you say that you don't feel as recovered as you'd like to be. Is that accurate?"

Tony snorts. "Not as recovered as I'd like to be? Sure, doc, that's accurate. If you've got a magic wand to make me all better, wave that fucker right now."

The doctor smiles, but he looks tired. "You have no idea how much I wish I had a magic wand to wave. However, just given the few things you've shared about the sexuality therapist you saw in your late teens, I do think there are some things we could work on that might help you feel more comfortable."

"You think she sucked?" God, is Tony going to have to sit down and make a list of every single fucking person Obie stuck in his life and then undo all their bad mojo?

Dr Brown opens his mouth, shuts it, and says, "Yes. She sucked. Many families put the young omega's readiness to accept a marriage contract above the mental and sexual health of the individual."

"Wait--are you telling me that you'd have counselled me to avoid alphas? Just, what, marry Alex?"

"No, I'm not saying that. You have a dual preference, and as time passed and your hormones matured, your heats would be increasingly uncomfortable without an alpha's sexual presence."

Tony frowns. "Then what the fuck would you have done?"

"We'll skip all the parts where I learn your history, your goals, interview both you and Na Richardson about your sexual responses before and after the--"

"You'd talk to Alex? About what I was like in bed?"

"Only with your permission," Dr Brown says quickly.

"No, no, I don't give a fuck about that. But why ask Alex?"

"You said that you shared your virginity with Na Richardson," Dr Brown says. "And after that, my understanding is that you were in an exclusive relationship with him, where you both deliberately explored your sexual feelings?"

"Yeah, but--does that count?"

Dr Brown takes off his glasses, and now he doesn't just look tired, he looks exhausted and a little sad. "Yes. It counts."

Tony stares at the polished mahogany conference table. He'll have to tell Pepper that she picked good--this place is posh.

Inside, his emotions are a swirling mess.

God, at the time, what she'd said had made perfect sense. Tony'd done her exercises, he'd worked on himself, and he had felt some better. Not great, but he hadn't expected to be able to be himself again. She'd said being changed permanently by sensory deprivation methods was common.

Later, when he'd seen Dr Katz, they'd focused more on making sure Tony was sane enough to come out from his steel-and-concrete reinforced bunkers and interact with other people. Having a positive sexual relationship hadn't been top of the priority list.

And yeah, OK, Dr Katz had tried to talk to Tony about his habit of fucking random strangers in bars, and Tony'd shut her down.

Then other things happened, some of which Tony can't explain, even to himself, much less others. Even now, he doesn't know why he won't go out on dates in public with Alex, except that it's *not safe*.

Probably that's his paranoia talking, but Jesus, with the lives they lead, it's hard to tell sometimes.

Tony rubs his forehead, trying to quell the sick headache.

Dr Brown waits while Tony composes himself, and then says, "Given how painful this topic may be for you, would you like to set aside this topic until our first individual or couple counseling session?"

Tony pokes at an oily fingerprint on the pretty wood. Alex wouldn't have been sloppy enough to leave fingerprints, even for so casual a meeting as this. "This sleep stuff. You said it would help?"

"Yes. I have a copy of the instructions. Would you like one?"

Tony nods, not looking up. "If I wanted to make my relationship with him stronger, what could I do? I mean, just to start with."

From the little rustles, Tony knows the doctor is getting the sleep information from his bag.

"Be honest," the doctor says.

Tony's not good at honesty. Lying is so much safer for everyone.

"Also, I would recommend telling Na Richardson the truth about your feelings of possession and your dissatisfaction at him marrying someone else. Accept that he may not respond positively, especially at first, but do it with the intention of opening up a space for increased honesty about your feelings for each other."

Tony had kind of worked up to explaining that last time. Being honest about his jealous feelings had felt like performing surgery without anesthesia. In a cave.

He'd sort of hoped to never talk about that subject again.

Still... Alex seemed to appreciate what he'd said, even if Tony'd stumbled over every other word.

"I guess," Tony says, looking up.

Dr Brown smiles wryly at him. "We can work on it in our sessions."

"Yeah," Tony says. "So. Let's get back to Steve. He's the priority. Jesus, I'm such a selfish fuck."

"This wasn't a digression. In sexuality therapy, every member of the relationship is important. Their feelings, their sexual health, are all important parts of the process."

Ugh, the process.

"So," Tony says warily, "you said E-9s do best with omegas who are couples?"

"E-9s are, almost always, om-sexual, Na Stark. They generally prefer extreme or androgynous omegas, and they are usually most satisfied when they have two or more partners. While I don't always approve of the verbiage in common parlance, it can be helpful. "Pack male" is the phrase often used for high-level male Es."

Tony thinks of Steve's stories. "Is two going to be enough? In the War, he had, you know, more." A lot more, from the sounds of it.

"According the forms Captain Rogers filled out, those were shared pack omegas, not exclusive to him?"

"Yes," Tony says. Boy howdy, Alex will agree to a lot of Tony's crazy schemes, but Tony's pretty sure Alex will draw the line at fucking Phil and Natasha. Please let Steve not want them to be shared out like good job stickers in a kindergarten class.

"Then I should think two will suffice. Exclusivity is very important to most E-9s. I'm rather surprised that Captain Rogers allowed them to be shared, but he is a very giving individual."

That's....interesting, actually. Tony wonders why Steve did allow it back then.

"Na Stark, there is something we should address at this time, I believe."

Tony's drawn out of his thoughts, looks up. "The fucking around. Right?"

"Exclusivity is an important quality for many E-9s, and Captain Rogers mentions it in his intake forms. Na Richardson did not, but it's still something we should discuss."

Alex hadn't mentioned it, because Tony filled out his forms.

"Look, I know--" Tony clenches his jaw, tries not to sound as crazy as he feels. "It's not as simple as people think."

Dr Brown nods. "Can you expand on that?"

"No." Tony crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm happy to do pretty much any kinky shit that Steve needs, but I'm still me."

"So, is it a question of personal identity?"

"Oh yeah," Tony drawls, "when I look in the mirror, I think, wow, there's a fucked up slut who can't say no to a nice cock."

Dr Brown doesn't seem fazed by this, which is kind of a shame. Tony usually finds telling the truth to be a pretty good way of getting out of this particular topic. "All right."

"Wait--that's it?" Tony demands.

Dr Brown blinks at him behind his weird oversized glasses. "It's your choice how to define your sexual limits. It sounds like you've chosen not to be monogamous."

"It's just not that simple."

"Yes, I know," Dr Brown says.

"And you're OK with this?" Tony demands again. Because--really?

"It's not something where my approval or disapproval matters. This is your sexuality and your choice. Do I think you take pleasure from the sexual acts you've described to me? No.

But I also think that you do take a great deal of emotional comfort in using your body in a way that serves your ends."

"Steve hates it," Tony says. "We had a really big fucking fight about it."

"I'm not surprised."

"I told him I wouldn't give it up or tone it down."

Dr Brown nods.

"You're telling me it doesn't matter?" Tony says. "That this fucking around, that not being exclusive, is just--what?"

"It's your choice, Na Stark. I believe that it does upset Captain Rogers a great deal, and I would be very surprised if it doesn't also distress Na Richardson, but they are not the only ones in this relationship, and their needs to do not outweigh your needs for sexual autonomy."

Tony stares at him. "You're telling me I can still fuck around?"

"Yes," Dr Brown says. He holds up a hand. "It will continue to distress them, but that is their problem, their emotional weight, and not yours. What I want you to determine is what works for you. Does the way you're using your body serve your emotional and sexual needs?"

"It's my best weapon," Tony says, curious to see what the doctor will say.

"Yes, I thought that might be the case." Dr Brown sits back. "Many omegas have similar viewpoints. Do you want to continue to use this weapon?"

"It'd be stupid to throw it away," Tony says. "Go unarmed? No thanks."

"What if you had other weapons? What then?"

"I'm not real keen on giving it up," Tony says. "Even if I had other weapons, this one is always with me."

"Then maybe you should keep it, at least for now."

Tony frowns at the desk, picks up the pen, dances it through his fingers. "I guess."

"From what I'm hearing you say, I don't believe that trying to switch to a truly exclusive sexual relationship would be ideal at this time. You're making a number of other significant changes. If you decide you'd like some tools to explore exclusivity, we can work on that in our sessions."

"You make it sound like a skill."

"It is a skill," Dr Brown says. "Never ever remove a coping mechanism without having a replacement already in play."

Tony's mouth quirks. That had always been one of Dr Katz's sayings. "Yeah, OK."

"All right," Dr Brown says. He folds his hands. "Let's go ahead and begin discussing some practicalities. We've used the paperwork from your forms for our initial work on the protocol, but normally, I see more limitations and preferences than you included in your packet for me. Would it be all right if we clarified those activities you and Na Richardson would particularly enjoy engaging in with Captain Rogers?"

Finally, a topic Tony can handle. "Sure," he says. "And I did include some limits."

Dr Brown checks his notes. "Ah yes. No animals and no anal sex, Na Richardson receiving."

"Look, he's just never enjoyed it," Tony says.

"Given that these were the *only* two limits mentioned, I think we can work around it," Dr Brown says. "Let's talk about some general high-level alpha preferences. How about sexual positions for penetrative sex?"

Tony relaxes, and pretty soon, he's immersed in the sort of discussion he'd been expecting. He happily discusses positions and kinks and toys and gear, naughty scenarios and all manner of possible bedroom hijinks.

Tony can talk about this shit in his sleep, and putting together permutations with Steven and Alex is certainly a pleasant way to spend an afternoon. It's also a metric fuckton easier than any relationship mumbo jumbo ever.

By the time Steve gets back, Tony's relaxed again.

Steve however....

"Why Steven, I had no idea you could turn that many colors of red," Tony says, amused. "Enjoy the naughty picture show, gorgeous?"

Steve blushes an even darker pink, which is pretty surprising, considering, and reaches for a chair.

Tony grabs the one right next to himself and hauls it out. "Sit by me. I'll keep you safe."

Steve shoots him a look of pure gratitude and sits.

Oh *dear*.

What in the world did that Dr Santos do to him? Tony thought it was only supposed to be the standard set of randomized visual, auditory, and textual imagery.

Clearly, drastic measures are called for, or Steve's going to combust of mortification before the doctors can finish his little sex prescription sheet.

As soon as Dr Brown leaves to consult with his cohort in crime, Tony pushes out his own chair so he can slink into Steve's lap.

Even more surprising, Steve lets him do it.

Curiouser and curiouser.

With his hands buried in all that thick straight hair, wonderfully soft and gloriously product-free, Tony murmurs, "Did you like the pictures I included, baby?"

The scent that pours off Steve is like heaven. A beautiful musk-arousal version of Steve's usual clean sunshine scent, and Tony can't help dipping his head to inhale more deeply. "Guess so."

"I--well, I sure did," Steve says. Cautiously, his big hands come up to rest on Tony's hips, slide up his spine.

Tony hums appreciatively. "Which was your favorite?"

"The one of you, under the tree," Steve says immediately.

Tony pulls back to look at Steve's face, surprised. It's a sexy picture, sure, but Dr Santos's email had requested that he include a few very mild poses, and that's one of them.

Steve smiles up at him, and he looks less embarrassed, more purely happy. "I loved it. Do you think I could get a copy?"

"Sure," Tony says. God knows Steve could have a wank folder full of much crazier pictures of Tony in all sorts of dirty scenes.

Steve presses a kiss to Tony's jaw, right near his ear, and Tony shivers.

Yep, whatever the hell Steve saw in that picture got him very very hot. Tony likes the way Steve's hands feel on him right now, confident and strong, like Tony's precious. Which is stupid, but if Tony wants to prolong this, screw it. He's done worse things.

"It was taken on Alex's land," Tony murmurs. "There's some old growth forest and a bed of violets, and he loved to play there as a kid."

Steve's hands skim up to Tony's shoulders. He's watching Tony avidly, and God, it feels good.

Tony tips his head back, baring his throat.

Steve makes a pleased noise, kisses Tony's jaw again. "Is this the trip you told me about? Where as soon as Alex left school, he hauled you to his family home and made love to you in the ancestral bed?"

There's no hint of jealousy--in fact, if Tony didn't know better, he'd say Steve really likes the idea.

"Yeah," Tony says, caught into honesty. "We hadn't even really graduated, but they let me go with him. We fucked so loud, his mom put a set of ear plugs at every place at the breakfast table next morning."

Steve laughs. His whole face changes when he's happy like this, and Tony's breath catches. There's faint crinkles around Steve's eyes, and his eyes are twinkling. "She must have been a real corker. Did it make you two behave?"

"Are you kidding?" Tony demands. "I told Alex it meant that now we could really let loose without worrying."

That makes Steve laugh harder. "Bet his mom just loved that."

"She didn't seem to mind. Well, she did, in a general kind of way. Boys, be quieter when people are trying to sleep, but they loved Alex. Just--loved him. I think they were glad he was so happy."

Steve's kiss to Tony's jaw lingers, and then Steve nibbles gently. "It's why I like that picture so much. You look happy. Sexy and happy."

Tony just has no idea what to do with that, so he avoids answering and just concentrates on enjoying the kiss.

Maybe, if he's extra good, he can talk Steve into petting his neck. Tony opens his mouth to suggest that, or a few other ideas he's cooked up in the meantime.

Naturally, that's when Dr Santos comes back in.

Steve doesn't actually levitate to the ceiling in embarrassment, but it's a pretty close thing. He does very gently put Tony back into his own chair.

Which is a crying shame.

Dr Santos doesn't even bat an eye. She probably wouldn't care if they fucked like minks, but Tony feels a surge of irritation at her anyway for interrupting his perfectly nice snuggling session. That's the damn point of this whole meeting--to snuggle Steve properly.

Dr Brown comes in just a few minutes later, and by that time, Steve has recombed his hair and straightened his shirt. His blush is still a mottled mix of all the deep pinks a man of his complexion can turn.

Tony hopes it means they'll be able to pick up the snuggling when they get home.

"Sorry for the delay," Dr Brown says. "Printer jammed. Here we are. Copies for everyone of the prelim graded list. But before we get to that, I'd like to discuss a few things."

"OK," Steve says, earnest as ever.

"Now, when I discuss a possible protocol with my clients, I like to assure them that the recommendations are just that--they're suggestions, not rules or laws. It's more important to

have an enjoyable, sexy, fun evening than to tick off a check mark."

Tony waggles his eyebrows at Steve and murmurs, "Tick off my check mark, baby."

Steve rolls his eyes at him and mouths, "Behave."

"Make me," Tony says, eyes twinkling, but he does turn and look at the two doctors. Dr Brown looks amused, and Dr Santos is typing. "You were saying, doc?"

"Yes. The second point I'd like to make is that normally when I create protocols, I have every member of a relationship present. Na Stark has kindly agreed to bring Na Richardson to speak with me when he returns from out of town."

And won't Alex just love that. Couples counseling, too. Whoohoo.

"Na Richardson is a virgin, and, given his type and sexual preferences, I would normally insist on several supportive counselling sessions before engaging in sexual contact with a contracted alpha, even with a long-term omega partner present." The doctor flips the cover of his report over, where there's a graph. "Given the Captain's most recent scores, I'm waiving that."

Tony immediately flips to that page, skims the math. "Fucking *hell*." Sure, Tony hadn't expected Honey's snuggle sessions and the long pack dinners with the team would solve Steve's problem, but he'd thought it would at least stop the degradation of the system.

"Yes," Dr Brown says.

"I'm theorizing that the slide has too much hormonal momentum, and there's a cascade loop in the adrenal system," Dr Santos says. "I'll spare you the mumbo jumbo. It's written out, at the end, if you want a second opinion. But he needs a kick start, a good solid boost."

"I'm happy to fuck him senseless if that's what it takes," Tony says grimly. He closes that report--he's not a doctor, but he knows his math. Santos is right.

"If he's too worried about hurting you, that will backfire," Dr Brown says.

"Then Alex can fuck him senseless. Hell, we'll take turns. But Steve is not going down. We will not let that happen."

"Tony," Steve says, laying a hand on Tony's arm.

Tony looks down and realizes he's shaking. Jesus.

"I'm fine," Tony says. He should have taken the anxiety drugs again, but he's not supposed to use them often. It fucks too much with his system, and passing out seems to offend his numerous housemates.

"Tony, I won't let myself get sick. I'm looking forward to making love with you. Let's see what the protocol the doctors designed, OK?"

"Yeah," Tony says. "Yeah, OK."

"So," Dr Brown says, and he's really not such a bad guy, Tony's decided. "To just review. As expected, Captain, you've scored as strongly om-sexual with a preference for androgynous or extreme omegas, with a strong secondary preference for dominance and pack-oriented relationships."

Pack male. Tony's not going to tease Steve about the title. Much.

"Based on the written tests, Na Richardson scored as a moderately om-sexual omega with a very strong preference for submissive, extreme omegas, and a secondary preference for dominance and pack-oriented relationships."

Pack bitch. Tony is definitely teasing Alex about that one, but, just maybe he'll try it first over a video link. Just in case it makes Alex cranky.

"Na Stark, on the other hand, is a dual-preference omega with the standard affectionate preference for dominant omega and heat preference for high-level alphas, masculine gender preferred for the alpha and--."

"Say," Tony says, interrupting, "I was wondering something."

"Yes, Na Stark?" Dr Brown asks.

Dr Santos, on the other hand, gives Tony a narrow-eyed look. Yeah, Tony can see why Steve found her a little scary.

"You didn't perform any Klennecky tests," Tony says, and if he's playing dumb, well, so what. "I mean, we had our old results, but..."

Dr Santos peers at him over the top of her glasses, purses her lips. "Your partner was not able to attend in person. To get an accurate read, we'd need both of you present."

"What?" Tony asks, and it's actual sincere confusion this time. "But Steve had to be alone."

"Omegas of Klennecky scores 6 and above can affect each other's strength level. That's one of the reasons that pack bonds happen with multi-omega packs, but rarely when only one or two omegas are present."

"Who figured that out? And when?"

"It's still being researched," Dr Santos says, giving Dr Brown a look. "It's very difficult to research pack omegas. Most packs won't give permission for even very un-invasive tests like a Klennecky read."

Steve's face has gone flat and hard, and Tony's surprised to scent a quiet dark note, not unlike when Steve finds a villain in his lair.

"Most packs find that Klennecky tests can cause moderate distress in an omega," Dr Brown says mildly.

"Spense, it's just--" Dr Santos shakes her head.

Steve gives Dr Brown a frankly approving look. "I'm glad Tony didn't have it, then."

"I don't mean to make you misunderstand, Captain," Dr Brown says. "Klennecky tests can be quite important. They measure overall para-sexual health as well as other factors. I would like to perform a short version next time your partners come in," Dr Brown says.

Fat chance of Tony getting Alex in the door if anyone's got a Klennecky test about, but Tony figures they can tackle that problem later.

"We'll see," Steve says firmly.

"But to return to the overview," Dr Brown says. "So, given the high Klennecky levels of the omega partners, we were able to make some very positive recommendations for Captain Rogers. Captain, I think you'll be pleased to know that you should not require any Compassionate Care Companions at this time."

Steve does look visibly relieved. Poor guy. He'd been so fretful about that. Tony squeezes his hand, and Steve smiles back at him.

"Overall, the Captain's scoring indicates that he finds the following most beneficial to his para-sexual system: procreation related positions and actions, including heat sex; possessive displays including marking displays; pack-type mating or courtship behaviors; emotional connection and affectionate connection displays of most kinds, and of course, dominance and traditional sexual positions such as alpha from behind."

Steve's turning a little pink, but Tony waggles his eyebrows at him and mouths, 'Sign me up'. Steve rolls his eyes at Tony, but he looks less embarrassed.

"These results are very much in line with other E-9s," Dr Santos says. "If you'll turn to page five, we've outlined some major activities that should boost his system."

The report turns out to have been ordered in neat sections. The biggest boosts are first, the smaller boosts next, and the maintenance boosts in a section on their own.

"Does this say pregnancy?" Tony asks, feeling bewildered.

Beside him, Steve is turning pink and white and then pink again, like he's blushing but anxious, over and over. It's fascinating and appalling, in equal measures.

"Yes, Na Stark," Dr Santos says. "I know you probably were planning to wait another year to start your family, but under the circumstances, I recommend considering it."

Tony has just enough presence of mind not to say No Fucking Way, Beta Bitch, because Steve is stroking the report paper and looking *wistful*.

Christ, his life, how is it always turning on him?

"I guess we'll have to wait, but it would be nice. I've always thought Tony would make such a good mother," Steve says.

Tony feels lightheaded. Oh God. Maybe he'll just pass out after all.

"Since Na Stark has a career, maybe they can have their second bear the kids," Dr Santos says.

All Tony can do is look at her. He absolutely refuses to let words fall out of his mouth at this time. People say Tony is incapable of tact, but that is a lie.

But Steve is far, far too perceptive, because he says softly, "I bet you'd like Alex to have your children."

Tony jolts like he's just been shot. "It's-- Look. Just--we can't, not, look, can we talk about something else, please?"

Steve brushes his hand over Tony's. "Sure, Tony. What's the next activity? Let's see... Oh."

The blush isn't quite as bad this time, but it's still impressive.

Tony glances down. Ah. He'd wondered when that one would come up. Virginity always is a hot commodity. "It says Virginity with claiming 29%, without claiming 17%. Are we talking just sexy kidnapping scenarios here? Heat sex?"

"Permanent marking," Dr Santos says. "If an alpha is particularly strong, and the omega is a virgin, and they engage in appropriate sex acts, the alpha can permanently mark them."

"Yes, I know," Tony says flatly. He's reeked faintly of Fromm for years. "So if Steve marks Alex, he gets 29% of his mojo back?"

"Yes," Dr Santos says.

Oh, Alex is going to just love that.

"There are several additional factors which can further boost the impact," Dr Brown says. "Strong affectionate connection being the most critical, having Na Stark present, knotting, various positions, in this case hands-and-knees, mounted from behind being ideal, staking a claim through restraints and ritual possessive behaviors, and of course, feeding afterward."

"I can't just ask him to do all of those things," Steve says, sounding appalled.

Tony wants to say, "What you can't ask to pop Alex's cherry doggie style, but you can ask to get us *pregnant*?" He clamps his mouth tight, keeps the words behind his teeth.

"I think that would be a less than ideal beginning point," Dr Brown says. "If you'll flip to page sixteen, I've written up one of several possible schedules."

Tony flips to the page, stares moodily at the tidy chart. Oh yeah, this is so much better. Why the hell can't he just blow Steve until his system gets the fucking message? Yeah yeah, alpha

adrenal systems being as complex and fucked up as omega hormones, but still.

"I didn't realize this would count," Steve is saying happily.

So much for Tony's wild hope that there's been some bizarre accidental misunderstanding. Carefully, Tony asks, "Would you like to do what's on this chart, Steven?"

Steve's eyes shine, and he looks so relieved and so hopeful, that Tony feels his stomach sink. Tony's going to do this, and worse, he's going to talk Alex into doing this, too.

"I would like it," Steve says, sounding reverent and delighted and all those weird emotions decent people feel. "Tony, this is, I had no idea people even did this anymore. There's so much negative talk, but--oh, but maybe you don't like it. Gosh. I guess it's considered pretty out there, nowadays."

Tony looks back down at the happy little chart, thinks of the far kinkier shit he talked to Dr Brown about. "No, no, you're fine. I just wanted to check in and see if their recommendation was correct."

It obviously is. Steve's looking like a man who just received a stay of execution. "I thought you might think it too weird."

"Ah," Tony says. "No. That, we will definitely not think. Ask Alex about his friend Hank sometime. Alex is comfortable with traditional pack behavior."

"OK," Steve says, rereading his little chart happily.

Tony rereads it, too. *Formally induct omega(s) into pack, using traditional rituals: hand feeding, official pack courtship, all over body touches, scent marking, pack celebration, 'blessing the bed', etc.*

Oh yeah. Tonight's planned phone call to Alex is going to be just great.

Tony flips that section of the report closed. "That's wonderful. Don't get me wrong. We'll be thrilled to have Steve feed us teeny tiny bites of finger sandwiches, but I think we're still pussy-footing around the big topic. Fucking. Let's talk about the fucking."

"Tony, jeez," Steve says.

"I'm not planning to leave until we have a plan in place that will significantly improve your numbers. You're getting tested by Rowland at the end of the week, and no offense to all the traditional pack shit, but this is your para-*sexual* system. I'm not letting some Shield-picked pushy little bottom get their greedy claws into you."

"Your boy's got a point," Dr Santos says.

Steve is staring at Tony like he's never quite seen him before.

"Look, Steven," Tony says, leaning forward. "You said we'd solve this together. Have you changed your mind?"

"I don't think--" Steve says, then trails off.

"Do you not want my honest opinion here? Because if you want, I can go."

Steve runs his hands through his hair. "*Tony*."

"What?"

Steve sighs. "I just wanted our lovemaking to be something we both enjoyed, at our own pace."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but I find your pace a little slow, babe."

"I want you to understand, really understand, that I value you beyond your sex." Steve searches his face, and the great big sap is so damn earnest, it kind of makes Tony's heart hurt.

"I do understand," Tony says softly. "But you remember what we talked about? You'd rather make love," God, now Steve's got Tony saying it, "to me in a way that meant you'd have no regrets if I blackout? The best way to assure that is to do it this way, planned, not when either of us is upset. What about date night?"

Steve is looking down at the table again, expression hidden by his bangs.

"I love date night," Tony says, because fucking hell, it's true. This week, Steve took him bowling. Worse, Tony had *enjoyed it*. His rep may never survive. Those shoes were a crime. "And the next time we have date night, I'd like to end it on the couch, like the other day."

Slowly, Steve nods.

"Do you promise? Because you've been known to welsh on me when it comes to sex. After we got back from Honey's club, you kissed me for an hour in the kitchen, and then you left, you big jerk, and I had to handle my own case of blue balls myself, when you have a perfectly gorgeous cock in those trousers of yours. It took me two rounds with the Megaknot vibrator, and it was just not enough. But by then my wrist was tired, so I gave up and went to bed, and it was all your fault, you meanie."

"*Tony*." At least it's the 'Tony behave' tone, not the 'Tony I'm really mad at you' tone. "It was not my fault!"

"Yes, it was," Tony says calmly. "You can't wander around in a tux for four hours, looking beautifully menacing and shooing evil-doers away from my friends, without getting my boxers a little wet. And you brought crayons and a coloring book in case Liam was there."

Steve rubs his hands over his face and peers at Tony through his fingers. "That's what you're focusing on?"

"Hell yeah," Tony says. "You would not believe how many of the girls wanted to take you home and do wicked things to you after that."

Or, to be honest, to the nearest supply closet. Tony had caught Rhea moving the gallons of floor cleaner around in there so there was more room. Greedy little bitch, sniffing after his Steve.

"Tony," Steve says wearily.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm just saying, Steven, they totally did."

Before either of them can get going, Dr Santos says, "The chart we want is the next section, under smaller boosts."

That's not a great sign, but Tony obediently turns to the proper section.

"It's a pick n' mix sex chart," Tony says, bemused. "Take one from the position column, one from the kink column, one from the pack behavior column, and ooh, one from the emotional overtone column."

Next to him, Steve has his fingers buried in his bangs. His cheeks seem to have given up turning pink and are a kind of dusky mauve.

"Basically," Dr Santos says. "You see the pink highlighted boxes?"

"Yep," Tony says. Doggie style, oh excuse me, alpha penetration of omega from behind, omega on all fours. Let's see, what else? Neck biting. Restraints. Collars. Feral behavior. Ooooh. "This is good. This is excellent. This is *perfect.*"

"Not the usual response, but glad to hear it," Dr Santos says. "The pink highlighted items are the most effective, the orange the next most, yellow is the next, and so on down to blue."

"Yep," Tony says. "Yep, yep, yep. Take a minimum of two pinks and an orange and we should have a boost of at least 7% per fuck, and if we manage three pinks, it's up to 9%."

Steve peers through his fingers at Tony, and Tony pats him comfortingly on the arm. "Not to worry, babe," Tony tells him. "I got this. Trust me."

"I'm not going to have to call those Compassion people?" Steve asks hopefully.

"Definitely not." Tony grins wolfishly at him, showing lots of teeth. "But you are going to have to fuck me."

Steve grins back at him, shakes his head. "Somehow, I just knew you were going to say that."

The rest of the meeting is straightforward, as far as Tony is concerned.

Sure, Steve is more than a little mortified by it all, but the results in the report have lots of chewy data that Tony turns into sex based equations, rather like he used to do, except with 'hormone responses' instead of 'lots and lots of orgasms' when solving for x.

On the way home, in the back of the limo, Tony amuses himself by putting together several of the most mathematically ideal scenarios and then ranking them by his own personal preferences.

Interestingly, actual fucking is not required for some of them.

Tony's current favorite is *Emotional overtone: affection, Kink: Tony wearing a collar and a leash, Pack behavior: Hand feeding & Providing for mate(s), Position: Tony kneeling.*

"Did you know that you'd get as much boost from properly feeding me cookies as you would from a mediocre fuck in a bed?" Tony asks, looking up from the notes he's made on the report.

Steve barely glances up. He's reading the Snyder sleep protocol. "I didn't need to sit through three hours with those annoying machines to tell you that."

"Somebody's cranky," Tony says. "Maybe somebody should have a nap."

"Mm," Steve says. "It says here that you're more likely to reach REM sleep if you have a Comfort Object. What's a comfort object? Is that a euphemism?"

"Nah, it's like a childhood toy. Blanket. Stuffed animal. Teddy bear. That kind of thing." Tony goes back to his notes. If he wears a collar and leash, and Alex wears a collar and leash (unlikely, but theoretically possible), and then *they* feed *Steve* the math dictates--

"Did you have one?"

"Have one what?" Tony asks absently, flipping back to double check a footnote about the power of growling. Alex is quite gifted at growling.

"A stuffed animal," Steve says, looking over the top of the thick brochure.

Tony looks up, frowns. "Yes."

"Do you still have it?"

Tony goes back to his notes. "No. They didn't send it with me to school, and after they died, it turned out they'd changed my bedroom back into a guest bedroom years ago. How do you feel about growling? You feel positive about growling, right? That's got to be some of what they mean by feral behavior."

"What was it?" Steve asks, and he sounds kind of weird.

When Tony looks up, all he can see of Steve is the top of his head, because his whole face is hidden by the brochure, which has an unconvincing stock photo of a white-on-white bedroom decorated in faux-zen and sheer white curtains. Yeah, perfect decor for the recently traumatized.

"What's with the questions about my old junk?" Tony asks.

"Doesn't it seem weird that they didn't give you your teddy bear?" Steve asks. "Or, was it a blanket? A stuffed dog? Bucky had a little stuffed dog."

Tony sets down his notes on the Alex growling math, since they're apparently having a Conversation about this. "No. It doesn't seem weird. It's exactly the sort of thing my parents used to do, so yes, to me, it's normal. It wasn't a dog. It was a stuffed elephant named Phant."

"Oh." Steve seems weirdly upset about this. "But Tony--are you OK?"

"Am I OK because a couple decades ago my parents were jerks? Yep. Pretty sure I'm over it." Tony picks up his notes again. "What about restraints made of common household objects. You'd be into that, right?"

Surely Steve would find tying Alex with his own tie hot---who wouldn't? All that slithery slinky silk....

"But doesn't that seem, I don't know, cruel?"

Tony sighs. No, he may be a world class slut but even he cannot think about sexy shenanigans and kids' stuffed animals. "What's this about, Steve?"

"The brochure says that having a comfort object from childhood can hold such a strong positive memory that it can create a feeling of safety."

Tony sighs again. "Christ. The things I'm willing to admit to you. I keep a screwdriver, OK?"

"What?" Steve asks, looking confused.

Tony grabs his notes and holds them in front of his own face, scribbles very emphatically on the paper. "I said I keep a screwdriver. Nearby. When I'm having trouble sleeping. It's my fucking comfort object, OK? It was a present when I was nine and I still have it and if you tell anyone I sleep with a screwdriver for a teddy bear, I'll be forced to take drastic measures. Somehow."

"Oh," Steve says, and he sounds so happy.

Tony rustles his notes.

"From your teacher," Steve says confidently.

Tony rustles the notes, more loudly this time. "Yes."

"Does it have a name?"

"What do you mean, does it have a name? It's a screwdriver!"

"Comfort objects are supposed to have names. It seems kind of sad if--"

"Lucretius," Tony mutters from behind his papers. "Its name is Lucretius. He wrote down the Epicurean philosophy of the atom in De Rerum Natura--basically it's a fucking long epic poem on physics. In Latin. About the Greeks. OK? Because I was a pretentious weird kid. Are we done?"

"What was Alex's?"

Tony harrumphs, but he knows that tone. Steve will just keep pestering him. "Alex did not have a screwdriver comfort object, because he was raised by actual human parents. He had, has actually, a stuffed fox named Bleeky. I don't know, just go with it."

"Bleeky," Steve says, sounding thoughtful. "Bleeky and Lucretius."

Tony glares at Steve. "Are we done?"

"Yes," Steve says. He picks up his brochure again and begins to read. "For now."

All Tony can do is groan. Kinky sex is so much easier than relationship stuff.

So much easier.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, I thought y'all should know that De Rerum Natura is pretty awesome. It really is an epic poem about physics and Greek philosophy. In Latin.

Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

> This chapter takes place several long hours after the previous one. I kind of want to say some things about why I wrote it the way I did, but...hopefully what I wanted to come through will come through. *crosses fingers*
>
> Many, many thanks to my beta, who encouraged me when I had doubts.

That night, snuggled in a pile of mostly-blankets, tucked in his carefully built best nook, deep in the bowels of his extra-secret secret bedroom, Tony has Jarvis place a call.

Tony carefully did not dress up for the occasion. He's wearing exactly what he would be wearing otherwise--extra soft thick black bamboo sleep pants, fuzzy gray wool socks, a battered Stones tee shirt, and his extra favorite flannel shirt, stolen from Na Anderson's workbench chair years ago. It still faintly smells of her.

The mug at his elbow smells of weedy tea and there's a small plate of toast nearby. He hasn't eaten any, but he might try, later.

Tony picks worriedly at a scab on his thumb. Alex is probably out, wining and dining his husband. Enjoying the last few days of Terrence's lovely company. Lovely, sane, young, cheerful, smart.... Exceedingly limber....

God, Alex probably won't even answer Tony's call. Who would, with a gorgeous hot young number like Terr around?

Then there's a little scraping sound, a soft "dammit", and a thud.

Alex's face appears like magic, image beautifully clear, courtesy of Jarvis. "Tony, darling. How are you?" He seems weirdly delighted.

"Good. I'm good." God damn, Tony feels shy. How the hell is he supposed to do this? Oh, right. He had this all planned out. Jarvis had very carefully not laughed when Tony practiced on him.

Tony looks Alex over--he looks tired, pinched around the eyes, and a little pale. Worse, Alex's tie is crooked.

Alex's smile fades under the scrutiny. "Darling, is something wrong?"

"Your tie is crooked," Tony says softly.

Alex blinks at him, looks down at himself. "Damn." There's the soft sound of slithering silk as Alex unknots the tie.

Tony takes Alex's distraction to brace himself. He has a pretty good guess as to why Alex's tie might be askew. Terrence has always felt that tying Alex's ties is part of his job as Alex's husband, but he's never been very good at it. Worse, Terrence sometimes watches YouTube videos to get ideas for new knots, when everyone knows that the classic is the best.

Or maybe they'd fucked in the bathroom at one of the fancy college functions.

Which is absolutely Alex's right.

It's just that Tony and Alex had learned how to tie a husband's tie by practicing on each other, and this particular tie is one Tony bought for him. Terrence should get wrinkles in his own damn ties.

"Did you go to a fancy shindig this evening?" Tony asks, stalling for time. He doesn't want to begin this honesty shtick by picking a fight.

Alex looks abruptly shifty. You have to know him well, but there's a certain teeny tiny guilty tinge to the set of his features.

"Jarvis mentioned that there was a drinks do with some senior faculty and spouses of the omega first-year and transfer students," Tony says, watching him closely. "That's why I was calling a little late. Is it, you know, too late?"

"It's not like you to worry about time," Alex says, looking up. He's taken the tie off, folded it carefully, and placed it on a dresser, it looks like.

"Is it?" Tony asks, pressing. Alex often dodges answering directly.

"No, you're fine." Alex sits down and sighs. "Terrence isn't here, and I don't have anyplace to be until 9 tomorrow morning, and that's only a conference call with my northern European buyers."

"But I thought--didn't you both have a to do tonight?"

"Terr was invited to a lock-in run by the omega honor society. Ostensibly to learn study skills and network, but they're watching old movies and eating too much junk food. Kind of a slumber party." Alex carefully removes his cufflinks.

Tony's astonished to recognize them, because he hasn't seen them in a long time. He made them for Alex years ago, out of a new alloy, as a kind of joke to himself about his dad. They were much smaller than dad's had been, and Tony'd carved some simple Virginia dogwood blossoms in the silvery metal.

"I guess the honor society thing would be more fun," Tony says, his eyes never leaving Alex's hands as he absently puts the cufflinks into a small velvet box.

"Yes," Alex says. "I did go to the wine tasting. I didn't last long, if that's what you're wondering. I had five people assume I was someone else's plus one, and I had three separate offers for an evening of debauchery."

Tony winces. "Should have left sooner."

Alex grins wryly. "I thought I'd better stay at least a few minutes, learn who people were, get a sense of the lay of the land."

Naturally, Alex had approached the party the way he would a strategic takeover. Tony would do the same, of course. It's just depressing.

"I'm glad you left."

"Me too," Alex says, stretching his legs out and kicking off shoes. "I had the limo stop at the waterfront on the way home, so I could check out their bizarre highway. The structural damage is interesting. What can I do for you, darling?"

Yeah, that's kind of how Tony's approached calling Alex in the past. I need something, help me, fix this. Often, Tony'd offer some kind of sexual favor in exchange. Sometimes, if Tony is extra honest, which he prefers to avoid thank you very much Dr Brown, he'd make up something he needed in order to offer the sexual favor.

"I, um, saw someone today, and I wanted to talk to you about it." There. Factual. Honest.

"Oh?" Alex glances up, socks in hand. "Should I get my tablet, help you research?"

"No, nothing like that." Tony's got Tom looking into medical solutions for alpha para-sexual systems already. "It was a sexuality counselor."

Alex's expression goes abruptly gentle, and Tony can't help it. He ducks his head, submissive as hell, turns to show off his throat.

"I see," Alex says, voice soft. "I'm proud of you, sweetheart. I know you find it hard to talk to therapists. What did she say?"

The praise, said in that cultured voice with its faint Southern drawl and its shiver of power, makes something loosen a little. Alex is right. It's so hard, so fucking hard, to talk to the shrinks. That he made Alex proud is--well, it helps, somehow.

Tony's head is still ducked down, eyes hidden behind his bangs. "His name is Dr Brown. He said he can maybe help me out."

"Dr Spenser Brown?" Alex asks, still so gentle.

"You know him?" Tony asks, looking up abruptly. Oh God, how fucking mortifying.

"Not to say know," Alex says. "I keep tabs on the best sexuality specialists in the area, for my clinics, and for help testing new medications we want to bring to market."

Right.

That does make sense.

"Um," Tony says, poking at a seam on his pants. "Is it, you know, OK, that I talked about you? With him? I haven't fucked something up for you, have I?"

God, he probably has. Who wants to work on a new exciting medication with an omega whose first submissive partner is such a colossal mess and permanent fuck up?

"No, darling, you haven't fucked up anything for me." Alex's voice is his asset. People don't notice it, usually, but he can turn the power on and off, twist the intonations to suit his purpose. Where Tony spent years leaning against Na Anderson in shop, Alex spent a good portion of his time sitting at Sa Honeycutt's feet, learning the nuances of movement, behavior, voice.

Now, Alex's voice is solid, firm, as though it's speaking of the foundations of the earth.

Tony relaxes, because Alex only uses that voice when he really means it.

"OK," Tony whispers, but he digs at the seam of his pants again. "He said--Dr Brown said, I should maybe do some extra counselling, with him. But also--"

God, this is just stupidly hard. Tony doesn't look up, and for once, Alex isn't supplying answers for Tony to react to.

Finally, Alex says, "Tell me, darling." He puts just enough oomph in his voice to make it easier.

"He wants us to do counselling together," Tony blurts out. "I said you'd do it, but now I don't know if that was too much. You'll be in town, sure, but who wants to spend an afternoon seeing a shrink? You hate shrinks. I had no business telling him anything and--"

Alex ruthlessly cuts off the flow of words, like he's slamming down a lock in a river. "I'll go."

"Oh." Tony peers cautiously through his bangs at the screen again. Alex is looking back at him, calm, unruffled. "You will?"

"I will." Simple. Direct.

"Oh." Tony's shoulders relax a little. "OK. Um. Should I--tell you the rest of it?"

"I'd like that, darling, but only if you're feeling up to it. Are you going to be able to sleep tonight?"

It's not a question that Tony is expecting, and he peers at Alex through his bangs, confused. "What?"

Alex seems to debate with himself, sighs a little, shrugs. In his half-opened shirt and black trousers, he's rocking what Terrence always called his mortician look. Tony thinks it's more mafia-don-at-rest, but he's too polite to correct Terrence. Well, more than half a dozen times, at any rate.

"When you talk about certain things," Alex says carefully, "you sometimes can't sleep for several days. Did you talk about Him or Them?"

Alex's words for Fromm and for the dastardly currs of his third marriage. Tony used to believe Alex used the pronouns for security, but lately, Tony's pretty sure it's because Alex knows that the names themselves can set off a cascade of panic. Everyone else seems happy to toss around their names, but Alex has always been careful of Tony.

"Him," Tony whispers, turning his head again, ducked down, as submissive as he can get.

"Darling, I wish I was closer. I'd curl up in your bed with my gun out, the whole night through."

That makes Tony smile, a real smile, and he looks back at Alex. "Remember when you shot my hoodie?"

Alex laughs, ducks his own head, still embarrassed. "I still maintain it was up to no good. And I was able to use it to prove you hadn't created a good seal on that far wall. If there was enough breeze to move the hoodie--"

"Yes, yes," Tony says, waving his arm grandly. "And it was poly-blend, besides, and we all know you can never trust a poly-blend. Shifty material, in league with the sinners instead of the saints."

Alex is grinning at him, fond. "Absolutely."

"Alex, have you heard of the Snyder sleep protocol?" Tony'd had to wait to read it. Steve commandeered the shiny brochure and made several notes to himself, making Very Worrying thoughtful sounds until Tony'd finally just looked the damn thing up online.

"Yes," Alex says. "I believe the clinic in Brooklyn uses it. I haven't read it in some time, but it's supposed to be a standard supportive measure."

The clinic in Brooklyn. Right. For omega rape victims, including victims of marital rape. Tony's been terrified ever since Alex founded it. Sooner or later, some fucker is going to try to shoot Alex dead over it.

"The doctor wants me to use it. He says--Alex, he says my first sex counselor wasn't too good. I guess I really fucked up, following her advice, but she sounded like she knew what she was doing, and I wanted--" Tony'd wanted to be better.

"Tony," Alex says, in his 'I mean it' voice. "You're allowed to follow the advice of the trained professionals hired to assist you. We were far too young to know what to do, baby, and she did help you recover quite a bit. You're not to blame yourself for this."

"Yes, Alex," Tony whispers, automatic. The relief makes him shiver, and he rubs his chin against his shoulder, twitchy and compulsive.

"Good boy," Alex says gently. "I'd sleep next to you tonight, if I could, but what if we leave the video connection up? I can still watch over you."

"You'd do that?" Well, of course Alex will do that. He's done worse. Tony frowns. "You have to sleep, too. I mean it. No faking."

"All right," Alex says, and his smile is fond again. "I'll sleep, too."

"Go get changed," Tony says. "You can't sleep in that."

"Yes, mom," Alex says, eyes twinkling, but his whole self looks less tired and more pleased.

It doesn't take Alex very long to pull on his own sleep pants, thick soft ones, and bring over a ratty navy tee shirt whose logo is too far gone to read. Left to his own devices, Alex dresses like a grunge teenager crossed with a ditch digger, complete with dirt under the nails and sturdy workman's boots. You never know when you might want to check out an underground foundation, as he always says.

Tony watches Alex change, notices the lack of bite marks, the pale skin gleaming in the soft hotel light. He isn't going to get a better segue than this.

"Um, Dr Brown says I need to be more honest in my relationships. Especially with you."

Alex turns, the old shirt half over his head. He drags it down, covering the chest he'd been careful to hide in the photos sent to Steve. As if Tony wouldn't notice, and as if Steve wouldn't have guessed by scent in any case. "Oh?"

It's a very cagey answer.

"Yes," Tony says. "I'm possessive. Of you. There. I said it."

Alex sits down on the edge of the big hotel bed like strings have been cut. "What?"

"Don't make me say it again," Tony mutters. Saying it once was hard enough.

Alex runs his hand through his hair, mussing the short cut. Tony misses the longer length. "You said you were a little jealous of Terr, but darling, I had no idea you were possessive of me. You've always said that--"

"I know what I said," Tony says, cutting him off because he can't bear to hear it again. "I was lying. Happy now?"

"No," Alex says slowly. "I would say confused. Very confused."

Tony huffs, aggrieved. This honesty shit is overrated.

"What about Steve?" Alex asks, and he sounds as if he's picking his way through a mine field. "I thought you wanted me to think about him."

"Yes, but--" Tony hunches his shoulders. "Don't you like Steve?"

"Of course I like Steve. Everyone likes Steve. He's a very likeable man." Alex points a finger at Tony. "Quit it. If you're going to be honest, then be honest. My brain can only take so many gyrations."

"Your brain is fine," Tony says sulkily. "You follow along with my engineering specs. Oh all right. Look. Do you--"

Jesus, this is fucking murder. So. Goddamn. Painful.

"Do I what?" Alex says eventually, and he still sounds confused. "Do I what, darling?"

Tony hunches his shoulders, peers through his bangs again. "You haven't decided to get married again, have you?"

Alex looks puzzled, but not mad. "No, darling, I'm not getting married again."

Tony gnaws his thumbnail, picks at a stray cuticle with his teeth until it bleeds. "What about Sarah?"

"My sister is perfectly capable of taking care of the family interests. You know I don't run anything for them."

Tony knows it's a sore point for Alex, but Tony presses. "What about an heir? Is she asking you to give an heir?"

"Darling, you seem oddly worried about this. Has something happened?" Alex's eyes narrow. "Your Captain was speaking to me about this new handler of yours. Did that little shit say something else to upset you?"

Would it be wrong to lie to and tell Alex that Rowland had said something? Or does Tony have to admit that this is his own paranoia talking?

"I just wondered," Tony says. That's honest, right? Kind of, anyway.

Alex swings his legs up and sits cross-legged. "No. To answer to your questions. I'm a free agent, as of," he glances at the clock. "Three days and six hours ago. Terrence and I aren't sleeping together any longer."

Tony's jaw drops open, hangs there.

"Darling," Alex says impatiently, "I did tell you that he'd be having a fresh start here."

"You didn't say you were breaking up!"

"Sweetheart," Alex says, and this time it's gentle, soft. "Terrence and I are friends, and we care for each other, love each other, but the monogamous part of our marriage is over. I wanted him to be free to make his own choices, and that meant changing our relationship."

"Yeah, but why isn't he in your hotel room blowing your brains out while he has the chance? You're paying for his entire college education! The least he could do is give you some goddamn nookie!"

Alex pinches the bridge of his nose. "I'm paying for his college because he wants to go and I can afford it."

"But isn't he grateful?" Tony demands, still bewildered.

"Yes," Alex says patiently, "but I'm not demanding anything like that from him. He doesn't have to pay his way by sleeping with me."

"I'm not talking about paying his way, I'm talking about finding you fucking hot," Tony says fiercely. "If you'd swept into my life like an avenging O angel bent on saving me from the damn marriage merry-go-round, I'd fuck you senseless every chance I got."

Alex just raises an eyebrow. "I believe I might have the pull to get you into an engineering program, if you'd like to go."

"Oh very funny," Tony says.

"Who says I was kidding?" Alex leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "Sweetheart, it was time. I love Terrence, but he's ready to move on."

"I could talk to him," Tony offers, even though he'd really rather stick a wrench in his own left eye.

"That's very sweet of you," Alex says, but he seems puzzled. Tony is, too, actually. "I thought you were jealous."

"I am." Tony shrugs, moody about it still. There's no need to keep mentioning the fact or using the word itself. "But he took good care of you. I just want--I want to make sure you're OK."

Alex cocks his head. "I can take care of myself when I need to. I'll be fine."

Tony sniffs. He heartily doubts that, but he can at least get Jarvis to watch over Alex's meals and sleep routine. Plus, when Alex stays here, Tony can keep a proper eye on him.

"Ever the vote of confidence in my abilities," Alex says, amused.

"It's not your abilities I'm doubting, it's your good sense," Tony mutters. "You had lunch with Tilly Stevens last weekend. It made the society pages."

"Then it'll give Sarah something to yell at me about," Alex says lazily. "You know she gets peaky if she can't nag at me about something. It would be rude to leave her with nothing to

talk about."

Tony rolls his eyes. "Tilly's as trustworthy as a shark. I'm surprised she didn't try to fuck you right there."

"We had a table outside," Alex says, eyes gleaming. "I tip maître 'ds better than she does."

Tony just covers his eyes with his hand. Of course. No doubt Alex had needed some nugget of gossip from her, but Christ, it was risky. Tilly's an old school alpha bitch, an 8, at least, and she's known to play a game with her cronies. Whoever can fuck the most difficult omega virgin wins.

"I just don't even want to know, do I," Tony says.

"Probably not," Alex agrees. He grabs his smokes, lights one, sprawls back on the bed.

"Do you remember the tree fort with the disco ball?" Tony blurts out. Oh God. He is so fucking bad at this. God, why can't he talk about his feelings like a normal person?

Alex cocks his head. "Yes. When we stole the class guinea pig to be our personal mascot. My sister has a photo of us holding Pig in his little Storm Trooper outfit. She keeps it on her mantel piece."

"Wait. I thought you got in big trouble for that."

"No, my parents kind of liked The Inter-Galactic Rebel Spies Arboreal Fortress, and they thought the world's smallest undercover space rebel in his various disguises was cute." Alex says. "Sadly, they thought making plutonium in a tree fort was a problem."

"Youthful hijinks," Tony says airily.

"Tony, we were eleven. We were going to make *plutonium* in a *tree fort*. It's a wonder all of New York state isn't a smoking crater."

"Your parents should have been grateful. We could have been smoking joints and swilling beer behind the grounds keeping shed."

"No, we couldn't. Sa Honeycutt would have had our asses if we'd so much as thought about it."

Tony wrinkles his nose. Alex is right. For being so mild-mannered, she could be a bit of a tyrant. Her main concern about them borrowing the class guinea pig had been that Pig's outfit shouldn't make him uncomfortable, but Tony'd been quite careful about that. Each of the armor joints worked beautifully, and the interior had been made of a NASA-specific cooling fiber.

Tony had sent the manufacturer a thank you letter for the sample they'd sent him, and in the letter, Tony had suggested they market the fabric with the phrase, 'for optimum summer enjoyment of the cavia in your life.'

For some reason, the manufacturer had declined to use Tony's tag-line in their marketing materials, but they had sent him a few more samples. Tony'd been pretty happy with the scaled-down samurai armor, even if Pig kept nibbling off the helmet ties.

Looking back, Tony thinks maybe he shouldn't have tried to make Pig a blaster that actually worked, but what was a Storm Trooper without a weapon?

Pity that paws aren't really designed for guns...

"You're thinking about the blaster specs again," Alex says.

"I still think we could have done better," Tony mutters. If he'd been able to get ahold of the kind of extra-precision micron tools he has available now...

"The main thing was to protect Pig from potential assault from a passing hawk," Alex says sternly. "Attacks from the air constituted a bigger threat at the time, so focusing on the strength of his body armor--"

They stare at each other and burst into giggles.

Tony ducks his head, still laughing. "That was a good summer."

Alex grins at Tony. "Yeah, it was. Do you want a copy of the picture?"

"Yeah," Tony says. "Yeah, Steve'll get a kick out of it, and I don't have many pictures of Pig."

"I have some," Alex says. He's always been better at that kind of thing, paying attention to the people in their lives when Tony's busily crouched down, peering at the innards of the car they arrived in instead.

"OK," Tony says. It's stupid, obviously, to want pictures of the damn class guinea pig, but--

"What made you think of it?" Alex asks. "Has River nagged Honey into getting her a pet at last?"

"No," Tony says. "Honey says she hates the way rodent pee smells. I told her I'd make her some odor-absorbing bedding, but--" He shrugs. "I think Honey just doesn't like them."

Tony doesn't see why, personally. After Pig, their fifth grade class had several rats, and Tony liked it when Slider rode on his shoulder. Sometimes, Slider would snooze in Tony's tee shirt pocket while he worked in the shop.

"What about a dog?" Alex asks, crossing his ankles. "I could talk to Rusty's breeder."

Tony taps his fingers against his thigh, considering. The current Richardson family dog was pretty cool and good with kids. "He was potty trained already, right?"

"With Sarah's attitude to the antique Persian carpets?" Alex snorts. "Please. Yeah, he was full-grown and completely trained. I like Hank's shepherds better, myself, but goldens are

nice dogs."

"I don't know," Tony says. "I'll think about it."

Not that he'll admit this to anyone, but he kind of likes animals. Tony always envied the Richardsons and their procession of family dogs. If you had a dog, you could go on adventures together, and if you told the dog something, he'd keep it a secret.

Tony's done a little research into pets, purely to assist River in making well-educated choices, and he found out that some rabbit breeds live quite a long time. Far longer than the sadly short lifespan some of the other rodents get. Tony'd been pretty upset when Slider hadn't gotten to live more than two damn years. When River had suggested Tony get a rat that she could visit at Stark House, he'd shaken his head.

But if Tony's had Jarvis investigate the plausibility of creating a more efficient rabbit-sized potty box and some containment gates that would work for a warehouse sized building, well, that's nobody's business but his own.

"OK," Alex says, but he's watching Tony curiously. Alex is going to ask him questions, Tony can just tell.

"It's my favorite summer," Tony says. Before his parents got weird and before puberty fucked up their bodies. Back when life was much simpler.

"I've always loved it, too," Alex says. "But why that summer, in particular?"

This honesty thing is going to kill him dead.

"You don't know?" Tony asks, looking up.

Alex shakes his head slowly.

"That's the first summer you skipped going home to your family," Tony says. He can't help turning his head, tucking his chin against his shoulder, showing off his throat in a way he only does when he's especially batshit crazy. The alphas like it better when you tip your chin up and up, baring the whole line of throat, and Tony's practiced that, is good at it, but when he's too much a fucked up bitch, he forgets and does this instead, like the fucking idiot he is.

"I wanted to spend it with you," Alex says, voice husky and rough. "I loved spending it with you."

"We had adventures," Tony says, and his voice is shaking a little. "We got to keep Pig and we built those little planes and that scope for the drain systems and we learned how to make cheesecake and we went on those hiking trips and we got to build the tent and go camping."

Pretend camping, really, but it had been great.

The school's massive grounds had felt like such a wilderness, back then. They'd tromped through what Tony now knows is just acres of carefully maintained upstate New York forest

with the occasional meadow. Hell, they'd only had to carry their stuff for twenty minutes to get to the camp site.

Tony can feel Alex's gaze. A warm weight of consideration.

There's a soft rustle, and then Alex is saying, "Jarvis, show him this one, will you, darling?"

"Of course, Sir."

Tony looks up, wary.

In the bottom right of the screen is a photo, with a faint crease at the edge from where it's been living in a wallet-sleeve.

It's the two of them, sitting next to each other on a log in the not-really-wilderness of their camping trip. Alex has a leaf stuck in his hair, because he'd been rooting around in the undergrowth, trying to find a still-green stick of the right size for roasting marshmallows. Tony's got a scratch on one cheek, and his face is tanned dark from playing outside all summer.

His hair is even more crazed than usual, and he has, good Lord, a fucking goddamn flower tucked behind his ear. It's not a tiny flower, either, but one of the school's prize roses, a lush dark pink monster a good two inches across.

Tony remembers now that Alex had picked it for him, removed the thorns, and adorned him carefully, because it was Tony's turn to play the Elf Princess in their forest game that day.

Thank fucking God his father has never seen this photo.

But that's not the worst of it.

Tony looks at the two kids, sitting next to each other, grinning up at the camera held by Sa Hamilton.

Their matching shirts are sky blue, not a great color for either of them, really. But that isn't what Tony focuses on.

In crisp white lettering, marching across their chests, are the words *Stark Family Vacation.*

Under that is a careful scattering of what probably looks like polka dots to other people, but what Tony knows is a depiction of the placement of the stars as seen in upstate New York during the summer. Alex had put glow-in-the-dark stickers on Tony's ceiling, too, in the same pattern, because Tony'd been really into space and astronomy that year.

Ad astra per fun is written in scrolling italic letters at the bottom of the shirts. To the stars through fun.

The Richardsons always made atrocious tee shirts for their family vacations, with kid-drawn illustrations and a new vacation motto each year.

Even the damn family dog is not free from the sartorial embarrassment. Tony has several postcards made from family snapshots, usually of Alex and one of their hapless Labrador retrievers, both of them wearing some terrifying tee shirt in nautical red or royal blue or, one especially vile year, lime green. Alex waving vigorously and the dog looking long suffering but steadfast in his little matching tee and cheerful ugly bandana.

Tony brushes one grease-stained finger down the picture of the two kids. "You got us shirts. I never understood why you called it a Stark family vacation."

"Because it's your name," Alex says, as if that should be obvious, when to Tony, it isn't. Why not put Richardson family vacation on the shirts? Alex counted just as much as Tony.

"Did the school make the shirts?" Tony asks.

"No, mom made them. I sent her the drawing and what I wanted it to say and she did whatever it is she usually did to get them made into shirts." Alex stretches out more comfortably. "I should have picked a better color. That pale blue is hideous. I can't believe you put it on."

"I still have it," Tony says. It lives in his keepsake box, with the rest of his treasures. "Um. So. The thing is."

Alex waits, but Tony is having a hard time saying it. "Yes?" Alex asks, after a while.

"I'm supposed to talk to you about stuff," Tony says.

"Stuff from the counselor?" Alex asks. He looks thoughtful, rather than upset.

Tony feels another intense rush of emotion, there and gone too fast to even identify. Tony hunches down, eyes Alex, and whispers, "Alex?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"When you come, can I--Alex, can I sleep at your feet again?" Tony's heart is racing, like it's not able to keep up, like it's broken, like it's maybe trying to pound its way out of his chest.

Alex's eyes widen, just a little, but his expression is gentle. "I would like that very much. I've missed it."

"Me, too," Tony says, but it comes out as a whisper.

"Sweetheart, are you doing all right?"

Alex is just as gentle as always, but Tony flinches. Maybe he should check the alloys resting on the third workbench. Tony shifts his weight, trying to remember what experiments are running. But no--he's stalling. The counselor, who'd told him wrong things, who'd made him hurt Alex, who maybe reported everything Tony'd told her right back to Obie.

Tony has another flash of memory, wicked-sharp, of cigar smoke, of expensive male alpha cologne, of blue starched cotton shirts with crisp white collars, of a heavy paw of a hand,

sliding over his shoulder, of the elbow resting right against Tony's neck, ultra-sensitive with puberty's vicious hormones. Of fear and arousal and shame swirling together.

"--heart, focus on my voice. Inhale, two, three, hold. Exhale, two, three, hold."

It's a tone Alex almost never uses, the tone reserved for emergencies, low and serious.

Tony's head snaps up, breath choked to stillness by the throttling panic. He sees Alex's expression, fierce and intent, and oh God, is Alex angry? Tony scrambles backwards on his butt. He drops his gaze, chin turned to the side, gasping in air and trying to apologize all at once, like a confused mess of twisted impulses and crossed synapses, unable to get out more than 'sorry, sorry'.

"*Tony*," Alex says.

Tony can almost feel Alex's voice, like a touch, and he looks up, struggling to draw in air past the constriction in his throat.

"Good," Alex says, "you're so good for me, that's right, just focus on me, I'm right here. You're going to listen to my voice, and you're going to do what I say, because you're always so, so good for me."

Tony can't look away.

Alex is leaning forward, nose to the webcam, and he looks almost silly from the angle of the lens. "Inhale, little brat, hold, two, three. Good boy. Exhale, slowly, that's it. Good. Hold, two, three. Inhaaaaale, that's right, so good for me, hold, and exhale, good, shhh, so good."

Tony obeys, because he has to, because this is Alex, and because this is the voice that goes straight down his spine, right into his heart, directly to the back brain. The Voice of God, Sa Honeycutt calls it.

"Good, little brat, so good," Alex says, gaze fixed on him, and Tony follows the voice. Inhales, holds, exhales, holds, and slowly, slowly, his heart slows, too, dragged back to calmness by the force of the breath and the absolute insistence in Alex's voice.

"There," Alex says, after a time. "There. You're so good for me."

"Fucked up," Tony manages, but he keeps his breathing slow and even.

"But good, always so good," Alex says, in that same voice of absolute certainty. "Tony darling, when was the last time you took your anxiety medicine?"

"Tuesday," Tony says. His voice is rough, the way it gets after a bad panic attack. "Can't--can't have it again."

"Do you have the relazepam with you?" Alex asks, as if he's merely curious. "The ones I gave you?"

Tony realizes he's soaked in sweat, that his hair is in his eyes, that he probably looks like one of the street junkies who sometimes use Alex's walk-in clinics.

"Focus on your breathing," Alex says, somehow getting the words out quickly without losing the drawling Southern edge that Tony finds so comforting.

Tony grabs onto Alex's voice like a drowning man.

"Relazepam, sweetheart, can you just nod or shake your head?" Alex says.

Tony nods, and his greasy hair feels disgusting when it sways on his forehead.

"Good boy," Alex says. "I want you to take one of the pink ones. Can you do that for me?"

Tony fumbles around on the shelf behind him. He has tiny stashes of medicine, bottled water, bandages, explosive charges, all within reach down here. In a cloisonné pill box decorated with Virginia dogwoods is a small rainbow of pills from Alex. Antidotes to rape drugs, some narcotics for when Tony's badly hurt, and a few others. Alex always gives him enough so that Tony can keep some in all of his hideaways.

Tony fishes out the pink pill and swallows it dry.

"I want you to have a little water or tea, if you can. You just nod or shake your head if you feel you can do it, or can't, OK?"

Tony takes the mug of tea in both hands, sips. His hands are shaking, badly, and the tea spills on his goatee, but Alex doesn't chide him.

"So good," Alex murmurs. "Thank you, darling. Can you come a little closer?"

Tony shuffles over, feeling exhausted and worn out. "It was Obie."

The flash in Alex's gray-green eyes is unmistakable. It's the expression of a predator who's just spotted game. Then the spark dies, replaced by a wash of regret that's gone almost as soon as it appears.

"He's dead," Tony says dully. "Motherfucker's dead and he's still fucking with me. With you. God."

Alex sighs a little. "We don't have to talk about this now, unless you want to."

Tony drinks more of the tea, stops when he feels it dribbling down his chin. He sets the cup aside, spilling some even though it's only half full. "I'm supposed to be honest with you."

"You will be," Alex says, and he's laying his hand on the laptop screen. "I'll be honest, too. We'll be honest with each other."

"Yeah," Tony says. "Yeah, OK. Um, Alex?"

"Yes?"

"Are you mad at me?" Tony risks looking at him again.

"No, darling, I'm not mad at you." Alex is still kneeling on the bed, and his face is pale, tired. "You haven't done anything wrong. Darling, this counselor, Dr Brown, did you have a difficult discussion like ours, with him?"

Tony nods dully again. Jesus, he's fucked up. "There's other stuff. I'm supposed to tell you things."

"Hm," Alex says, and he sounds thoughtful.

Despite Alex's answer, Tony still expects him to be angry. So many people get mad at Tony when he goes off the rails like this. When he gives into being the fucked up bitch. When he's a fucking freaked out hot mess, hiding in a bunker like a paranoid supervillian and dressed like a homeless person.

"Darling, I'm sure the things you have to tell me are important, but do you *want* to talk about them right now?"

Tony shakes his head, exhausted. But he adds, "Supposed to."

"Yes," Alex says. "Sweetheart, I think, for once, that we should just do what you want."

Tony swipes at his beard with his shirt cuff again, probably smearing tea all over himself, but the shirt is sticky with drying sweat. "Not supposed to do that. It'd be rewarding the anxiety."

Alex looks at him, fond and wry. "I think, given that it was the not-so-good counselor who made that rule, we can overlook it just this once. I'll take any blame, OK?"

Tony scrubs at his damp shirt sleeve. He's sweaty and shaky and exhausted. "You know the tree fort stuff?"

"Yes?"

"That's part of it." Tony snuffles a little. At some point, he must have been crying, because he's stuffed up and full of snot. God, he is so fucked up. Who doesn't realize when they're crying?

"Part of what you were telling me?"

"Uh huh," Tony says. He slumps down. Maybe Alex's medicine is kicking in. "Alex--what's the relazepam?"

"It's a third generation omega-specific benzodiazepine. It doesn't work as well as the one you normally take, but it's been conclusively proven to not affect the hormone systems. It's safe to use as an alternate, as frequently as daily, even with Klennecky 7 and aboves."

"How come my doctor didn't write me a scrip for it?"

"It's not available to prescribe in the US yet. My clinics are participating in the FDA trials."

"Oh." Tony can feel the anxiety slowly trickling away, like it's being bled out of him. He still feels like shit, but the distress is a little more vague, a little less sharp. "How'd you manage that?"

"Bribery and corruption," Alex says. "I own a few key people at the FDA now."

"Sneaky," Tony says. He yawns.

"It's safe. They've been using it in Europe for several years to combat post-bonding nausea in all three types, but there hadn't been trials that directly studied its effects on panic because the trials on alphas didn't show promise. But a lot of doctors were prescribing it off-label, for omegas, because of the low side effect profile. It's a benzo, so give it a shot, right?"

"A safe gamble," Tony murmurs. "It might or might not help, but it probably won't hurt."

"Yes," Alex says. "Sweetheart, do you have access to a sink or wash stand?"

"Mm?" Tony glances around vaguely. "A little sink. Why?"

"I think you might rest more comfortably if you sponged off, rinsed your hair a little, changed your shirt."

"Fuck, I smell, don't I?" Tony sniffs himself. "Jesus. I'm sorry, Alex."

"It's all right. I can't smell you across a video line, even on StarkTech. Go ahead and wash up."

Tony pulls his shirt off, throws it off somewhere. He shucks his sleep pants and boxers, too. "Wish I wasn't such a mess. I meant to get you off. Phone sex. Was going to offer to play a game."

"We'll play games another time," Alex says, and his voice sounds fond. "A real night's sleep will do us both good."

"That's very sensible," Tony says, running water into his wee sink.

"Something both of us strenuously avoid being unless we can avoid it," Alex says wryly, and Tony has to laugh.

The water is tepid, but Tony wets a washcloth, dabs it with no-rinse old people soap, wipes wearily at his skin and face. He reeks of fear-sweat, and the scrubbing makes his ugly scars stand out. It's a good thing he gives an exceptional blowjob, or no one would sleep with him once they got a good look at him with his clothes off.

"Darling," Alex says quietly, as Tony dunks his head into the sink to rinse his grimy hair.

Tony scrubs at his scalp for a quick minute, then wraps his head in a super-absorbent microfiber wicking towel. He looks like an idiot, because Stark makes the damn things in

only a few colors because of the damn chemistry. Every last one of them pastel--Tony'd chosen the beige. At least it isn't pink.

Still, nobody looks sexy when wearing a towel turban and a set of scars like his.

Tony resists the urge to hide. "Yeah? Change your mind about the video sex?"

"No. Well. Not exactly. But I thought, since I'm here, you might want to stroke your neck before you sleep. Relax you a little?"

Alex is looking at him cautiously, and Tony cocks his head, wipes his ears dry. "Huh. Yeah, I guess. Do you like it? When I do that?"

Alex nods slowly. "But I don't want you to do it if you think it will worsen the nightmares."

"They'll come whether I pet my neck or not," Tony says. The only things that keep them at bay, and only sometimes, are Alex wrapped around him and serious amounts of drugs.

"Then I'd like to see my snoozy relaxed brat before bed," Alex says, and his eyes are twinkling.

Tony glares at him, but it's half-hearted at best. "You are a freak, Richardson. You get Tony fucking Stark and your request is for snoozy neck petting."

"Yep," Alex says, sprawling back on his bed and shoving a pillow absently behind his head. He waves a languid hand at Tony. "Come on, my beautiful brat, show me how sleepy-eyed and snoozy you can be."

"*Snoozy*. For fuck's sake," Tony mutters, but he's grinning a little as he pulls off the towel turban. There's no reason for Tony to put on clothes--Alex has seen him naked a million times, but without Alex's arms around him, Tony feels safer dressed. Which is stupid and fucked up, but there you go.

The shirt he tugs on is worn, a dark gray that's faded to near-silver, and the band logo has shattered from too many washings.

After he's dressed, Tony carefully finishes his tea. Alex watches him, and it's comforting, calming, to hear the soft susurrus of Alex breathing, as natural as the tide, the background noise to most of the few genuinely good night's sleep that Tony's had in the past decade.

It's easier than it should be to curl up in the blanket-nest, to rest his chin on his forearm, blink sleepily at Alex, and then slowly and carefully stroke his own neck.

Alex's eyes grow heavy-lidded with sleepy arousal, with calm predatory intent, but it's not pressing. He just seems pleased, the way Alex gets when Tony's good for him.

"So lovely for me," Alex murmurs.

Tony can feel the relaxed submissive arousal from his neck flow all the way down to his toes, and he yawns, curling more into a ball, but still able to see Alex through his bangs. "For

you," Tony says, as the exhaustion begins to lap at his consciousness, like the tide coming in.

"Yes," Alex says, and his eyes are so lovely, but the expression in them is strange, full of care but also uncertainty. Tony should say something about that, reassure Alex, but he yawns instead.

"That's it," Alex murmurs again. "So good, sweetheart, you're always so good for me. Just relax now. That's it."

Tony's too far under to censor himself, too tired to stop the words that fall out of his mouth, too tired to say anything but the truth, too tired to not fall back on what he can't have, but always loved. "Tell me a story?"

"Yes," Alex says, voice so low it's a near whisper. "Close your eyes."

Tony obeys, and it's easy. He's safe, with Alex here to watch over him, with Jarvis to stand sentinel, with the full might of the protections he's wrought himself, with the added weight of the protection of home.

Alex's voice weaves a tapestry of words, draws him deep into slumber, pulling him beneath the frightening waves of the world and into solid earth.

Sleep curls around him, lazy as a cat, and Tony lets it.

The last thing he remembers is the familiar refrain:

O best beloved.

Some nights, held by Alex's voice, held by the scent and the weight of the earth, Tony even believes it.

Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

> I wanted to say a huge thank you to the many kind, insightful, and outright awesome comments this story has received. You have made posting this story a really wonderful experience. I hope you enjoy the new chapter!
>
> The next one (ch 73) is fully edited and complete, but ends on a cliffhanger, so I'm making sure I have several ready to go at once.

Tony slouches his way down the familiar hallway of Floor H. There's a collage of My Little Pony drawings on the door to 5H where his own engineering specs and architectural plans used to live. Mel's kata charts have been replaced by nature postcards on 3H.

When Tony passes 9H, he shoves his hands in his pockets and stares fixedly at the carpet until he's well past it.

A couple of kids yell "Hey, Na Stark!" as they dash past.

"Hey, hooligans!" he calls back, stuck on automatic but without his usual grin. "What's the rule about running?"

They slow down, but only until they're out of sight. He can hear their feet clatter on the stairs as they race up to the rec room at top speed. It normally makes him smile, but not today.

Tony pauses in front of her door. It's fucking stupid to come to her for advice about this. He's not fifteen any more, and he's not her kid. Not her problem.

Hell, Tony pays people to deal with his fucked up head, and he's even paying a couple more people to deal with his fucked up sex life. He should ask them instead.

But he doesn't want to.

He wants to ask her.

Tony shuts his eyes. He can't see the handwritten paper, but he knows what it says. *Office hours for Engineering: 3-5pm Mon, Tues, Thur. Other times by arrangement. Office hours for house kids of Floor H: All the times of the day and night.*

Before Tony can chicken out, Na Anderson says, "Come on in. Door's open."

It always is.

Na Anderson may be one of the most paranoid people on the planet, but she's never once put her own safety above that of her kids.

Tony opens the door and slips inside.

She's curled up in her big armchair, legs hooked over one of its arms, her back against the other, mug of tea on the same wooden crate that's always been there. Next to the mug is a stack of lab notebooks and a lumpy clay thing that seems to be a pencil cup. It's new, and Tony knows it must be a gift from one of the kids.

He wonders if she kept the hideous clay mug he'd made her his first year here. He'd chosen speckled blue glaze to match her eyes, but his art skills left a great deal to be desired.

No, she probably didn't keep it. She must have been given hundreds. The one he'd sent to his parents had been thrown away, he's sure.

Na Anderson is looking at him over the edge of the most recent journal of Metallurgical Arts. "Come have a seat. I'll make you some tea."

"I don't want any tea," Tony mutters, and God, he sounds just like the sulky teenager of a decade ago. Just like he'd done back then, he slouches into the room, slumps down onto the floor by her chair.

"Uh oh," she says. "That bad?"

Tony pokes moodily at the same worn bit of carpet he's been poking at for years and doesn't answer.

Na Anderson sips her own tea, and, after a while, a comforting hand touches his shoulder, rubs briefly.

Tony tips his head back to rest against her. He's always thought this must be what it would be like to have a mom who cared about him. That simple touch is more comforting than it has any right to be, and it gives him the courage to say, "What do you do if you really fuck up?"

Her hand rubs his shoulder again, gentle, the way his own mom never did. "Figure out your mistake. Say you're sorry. Repair or replace what you broke. Heal any hurts. Make sure you don't do it again."

Tony shuts his eyes. "Can't actually go back in time to undo what I fucked up."

"Want to tell me about it?"

Tony doesn't want to tell her about it. He wants to slap his hands over his eyes and pretend it never happened. "You know how, after I left school, I stopped being with Alex?"

"Sure," she says.

"I didn't really stop."

Na Anderson makes a noncommittal noise. Which, yeah, great, thanks, such an informative response. At least she isn't pointing out that he's a lying jerk?

"I mean, officially, we were still friends. Except, not really. I mean, I didn't let him come to any of the Stark functions, so we kind of weren't best friends on paper, but I still said hello to him if I ran into him at a party or whatever."

There's no answer from her, and Tony risks looking up.

She doesn't look mad, just thoughtful, considering. "You went to some of the Price functions, when he bought the company. It was in the alumni newsletter."

Tony had wanted to wring Penny Lancaster's scrawny neck for writing that damn puff piece about Alex acquiring Price Manufacturing, but Alex looked so damn happy in the photo that Tony hadn't the heart. "Yeah, well, I did in the early days."

"But not later," she says, and it sounds almost absent, the kind of comment she makes as she's running numbers and probabilities during an alloy test. Ah, yes, it does burst into flames at point three seconds, hmm.

"No, not later." Tony pokes at the worn carpet again.

"So you kept Alex on the downlow," she says, touching his shoulder again, affectionate. Nothing like Obie's heavy horrible paw of a hand slamming down on him. "Was this something you two decided and agreed on?"

"No," Tony says, hoarse.

"All right. How about you tell me the part where you're here, freaked out. What happened?"

"I asked Alex to come stay with me, once he got Terr settled out in Washington. We haven't been as close recently, and, you know, I wanted to fix it. He said yes. He even said he'd think about, you know, Steve."

"I see," she says, and Tony knows she does see. Na Anderson knows how indifferent Alex has always been to alphas. How Alex never seemed to feel the siren song of their scent, how he's always been puzzled at the idea of giving in to them. Alex agreeing to think about being with Steve that way is a gift.

"I thought it was going well," Tony says, which really should have given him a huge fucking clue that shit was going to hit the fan. "Except Steve's system is fubar'd, and when we talked to the doctors, they said Steve needs, you know, a big boost."

"Like a high-level omega who's never been with an alpha," Na Anderson says, very dry.

Tony hunches his shoulders, because, well, yes.

"You told Alex about Steve's system," she says.

"Yeah," Tony says, voice small.

"Was he angry?" she asks.

Tony looks at the carpet, drags his broken nail against the worn fluff. "He wasn't mad. I think he was hurt."

Na Anderson slides off the chair and drags Tony into a hug. She holds him close, and he buries his face against the familiar flannel of her overshirt. "Do you think he believed that was the real reason you invited him to stay? To fix Steve?"

Oh God.

Tony remembers the lively light in Alex's eyes fading, going dim, the way he'd looked away, towards the floor, submissive in a way he never *ever* is. The way he'd softly told Tony that he'd clear his calendar and be at Stark House as soon as he could arrange, yes, darling, of course, please give the Captain my regards, I hope he feels better soon.

"Yeah," Tony says. "Yeah, I think that's exactly what he thought."

"But it's not," she says, gently rocking him.

"No," Tony says.

"OK, baby," she says. "We'll see what we can do to fix this. I'm an engineer and you're a genius. Right?"

"Right," Tony whispers.

*

For a while, she just holds him, and Tony doesn't do a damn thing but hide his nose against her shoulder. Na Anderson smells of rock dust and granite and solder and sunlight, of kid shampoo and herb tea, of dry erase markers and chalk dust. The smells of home.

Her lips brush his brow, the same kiss Tony always drops on River's forehead after a kid-hug. "OK, kiddo, should we get to patching this?"

"Yeah." Tony draws back enough to look at her expression. "Are you pissed because we lied to you?"

"Nope." Her eyes are calm, and there isn't any anger on her face. Not even the annoyance she always shows when he's made lousy life choices and is welding while hungover. "I'm relieved."

Wait, what?

Na Anderson tucks his bangs behind his ear, which means Tony's a little more exposed than he wants to be. "Look kiddo, your love life is up to you, but I always thought it was a shame you two broke up."

Tony tries to wrap his mind around that. "Oh. Because Alex made me more stable." That makes sense.

"No, not really." Na Anderson is shrugging off her flannel overshirt absently.

"Then how come?" There is absolutely no way that Tony is good for Alex, because for fuck's sake, Tony is the very definition of hot mess.

She pauses. "I'm not sure you'll like my answer."

"Tell me," Tony says, demanding and curious. He's not sure he could live through the mortification of a sex answer, but what else could it be?

Her lips thin. "When you were a kid, you always learned about weapons to keep up on SI's advances."

Tony's stomach feels like it's going to drop out. She's right--whatever answer this is, he doesn't like it.

"You're very intelligent, Tony. You became good at building those weapons when your parents passed."

"I had to," Tony says, and he can hear the defensiveness in his own voice. Stark Industries had begun to fail, unable to produce good designs after his father's death.

"I know, baby," she says. "Hey, shh, it's OK. If there's blame in designing weapons, some of that comes to me. I helped you. I'm complicit."

Tony's mind rebels at the very idea, but before he can say anything, she goes on.

"But making weaponry isn't your natural forte, Tony. You excel at more than blowing shit up. Artificial intelligence. Flight. Mechanized joint structures. Engines."

Hearing her curse, even mildly, is startling. Tony swears like a sailor, but Na Anderson has a G-rated vocabulary even when the shop is on fire.

"Alex has always seen that part of you," she says. "The part that builds instead of destroys. More than that, Alex sees your craftsmanship."

"My what?" This has to be the weirdest conversation Tony's had recently, and that is really saying something.

"You're a craftsman, Tony. A master builder. We'd have gotten you your master certificate in welding a long time ago if the system didn't prohibit our kind. When you build something, you don't just put things together, you craft them with delicacy and care, with artistry and elegance, so that the form follows the function and there is both smooth simplicity and flourishes of complexity."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tony says, because this is just not how she talks. "My last big release was the goddamn Jericho, and after that, I've been making small electronics

and mp3 players and fucking cell phones."

Na Anderson sighs. "Your most recent StarkPhones have a revolutionary design in how they link to the SIM card. Alex was telling me about it when he was here for the Board of Trustees dinner dance."

Tony stares at her. Na Anderson hates cell phones, and he's always been surprised that the one he gave her wasn't yanked apart so she could steal the alloys and cannibalize the parts for something else. "Alex was telling you about the StarkPhone."

"Yes." She hands him her flannel shirt. "Put this on. You're going to catch your death wandering around the campus in nothing but a tee shirt in this weather."

Tony obeys. It's navy and black, less tragic than some of the plaids she likes to buy herself, not that he'd care either way. Steve's sartorial atrocities have inured him to clashing plaids, and Tony's always loved getting to wear one of her shirts.

Besides, the shirt is a nice distraction from the weirdness of this conversation, which is when she says, "Alex has always brought out the craftsman in you."

"Whatever that means," Tony mutters, hoping that concession will end this topic for good.

"It means that when you're in the shop, you don't just pay attention to getting the work done, you pay attention to getting the work done *right*. Not to someone else's artificial standard, but to your own. I don't know why he brings that out in you, but he does. He always has. The work you make for him always has touches of whimsy and grace."

"Whimsy and grace," Tony says flatly.

Na Anderson just shoves herself to her feet. She disappears into the back room, her bedroom, and when she returns, she's holding a small creature in her hands. She gives the key in its belly a few careful turns and then sets it down on the carpet.

"Behold the Dragon of Solitude," she says gravely, as the tiny lavender critter marches across the carpet, swaying slightly from side to side, the way komodo dragons and armadillos do, tiny clawed feet finding purchase even on the uneven carpet, long tail counterbalancing its equally long neck.

"I made that as a *joke*," Tony points out.

"But he works," she says. "When the Dragon of Solitude marches around, surveillance transmitters are blocked."

"It's a clockwork toy with some proprietary StarkTech stuffed in its belly," Tony mutters, crossing his arms over his chest.

"It's a solar and gear-powered work of art, kiddo. I've taken him apart and put him back together again, several times, and each time I marvel at the way each piece is perfectly proportioned and each joint works effortlessly and each tiny circuit functions at the peak of effectiveness."

Tony just shrugs. "Alex has a secret fondness for toys on his desk. I figured the dragon he uses as a lighter should probably have a friend."

"Yes, kiddo, that's what I'm saying. When you're around Alex, your work changes. It always has."

"I still hold hundreds of patents as the Merchant of Death."

"Yes, you do," she says, not blowing that off the way other people do when they're sucking up to him. "But when you're building as *you*, you paint your creations funny colors and you give them personalities and you give them moving joints and whenever you can, you make them fly."

Tony doesn't know what the hell she's getting at. "Are you saying that when I make desk dragons for Alex, I'm what, making the world a better place?"

Na Anderson, picks up the dragon, tucks it in his hands. Tony turns it over and over, touching the familiar joints and linkages, joints he later used in one of his suits, sensors he used for a satellite upgrade, mechanisms he'd patented for artificial limbs.

"I'm saying that when you build for Alex, when you're around Alex, you don't seem as trapped in the role Howard Stark made, the role Obie wanted you to fill. To them, the chief engineer at Stark Industries designed weapons to be built on a grand manufacturing floor by peons, period."

Tony draws one torn nail down the dragon's lavender side, feeling the smooth enamel, enjoying the silky texture of the paint he'd designed. It shimmers faintly, even in low light, because of the crystalline pigment structure. The paint formula turned out to be surprisingly non-toxic and heat-resistant, and Tony ended up selling it to a manufacturing firm that makes cookwear. The dragon prototype for Na Anderson is lavender, but the one Tony made for Alex was a fetching sea green that the cookwear company dubbed Cayman Blue.

"I've watched a lot of kids graduate," Na Anderson says, and her voice is gentle. "A lot of times, we Os get subsumed by the dominants in our lives. An artist who used to paint still lifes ends up painting seascapes because her husband is in the navy and he likes ships, or a good cook becomes an expert at making Indian because his spouses like it, even though he hates Indian."

Tony gives the belly key a few careful turns, strokes the dragon between its tiny ears, listens to the happy squeak the dragon makes, a private little joke because if you touch Alex just right, he'll squeak happily.

"You think Alex sees me as a toymaker," Tony says. That's not so bad, really. Tony's been called much, much worse, and Tony does enjoy making toys from time to time.

"I think Alex sees you as Tony, the kid who shyly asked Alex if he wanted to make a project for the science fair together and proposed an ant vacation paradise."

Tony pets the tiny ears again, listens to the happy squeak. He probably should have made this into a mongoose. "I don't really get it."

"I can see that. Kiddo, when I was talking to Steve last week, he was telling me all about how you saved the day by blowing up some concrete structure."

"Sure," Tony says, not sure what Steve's engineering kink has to do with anything, but happy for the distraction.

"I told him about our upcoming xeno-alloy paper, and he listened politely, but he didn't understand it. He asked me whether it could be used for making new armor for soldiers."

"Steve's not an engineer," Tony says. "That's all." The xeno-alloy has absolutely no use for armor, but Tony's hoping it will make good inexpensive alternatives in some engine systems.

"Steve isn't an engineer, sweetheart, but that's not what I meant. Steve is a soldier, and while he loves what you build, soldiering is how he filters what you build, that's the lens he uses. If Alex was the same as Steve, Alex would be asking what kind of pipes you could build from the alloy."

"Alex wouldn't ask that," Tony says. "Well, he might, if he thought the new alloy was going to be especially good for underwater work or something, but he just likes to hear about what I make."

"Yes," she says. "He just likes to hear about what you make. Not as Howard Stark's son. Not as the chief engineer at SI. Just as you, Tony, his friend and co-conspirator in all manner of adventures."

"I guess," Tony says. "But Steve isn't a bad guy."

"I'm not saying Steve is a bad guy at all, kiddo. I'm saying I'm glad Alex is in your life, because he's always appreciated a side of you that most people don't see." She brushes a fingertip on the dragon's side. "If the two of you are having trouble, and it sounds like you are, I think paying attention to who you become when you're with each other is a good place to start."

Tony doesn't want to point this out, because it's not a fun topic, but.... "The trouble was about sex."

"Yes, but it sounds like sex was just a small part of the greater whole. You're going to have to deal with the sex, but the issue of Steve's system impacts how you deal with it. I want you to look at other aspects of this relationship."

"But I'm better at sex than I am at relationships." And whoops, Tony had not meant to say that out loud and he sure hadn't meant to sound that whiny.

"Oh you," she says, fond and exasperated. "Tony, it's not a Relationship with a capital R, it's just Alex. You've known Alex forever. Come on, kiddo, work with me here. I remember the days when Alex had to take Advanced English Comp with Na Hauser and you'd lurk the

bottom of the steps to her loft, pouncing on him as soon as he got out of class, as though the wait had been years instead of minutes."

"It was *hours*, not minutes," Tony mutters. Brutal, horrible, long hours.

"It was an hour and twenty minutes," she says, amused. "I kept expecting to find you two running towards each other in a meadow while a movie soundtrack played some swelling crescendo, lovers reunited after hardship and privation, instead of one taking a theoretical math self-study tutorial in the library and the other writing essays on Fitzgerald and Faulkner in the upstairs English classroom loft."

Tony just huffs, because they weren't that bad.

Most of the time.

At least, he hopes they weren't.

She bops his nose with one calloused finger. "So what happened? When did your feelings towards Alex change?"

Tony becomes intensely interested in the toy dragon's left front paw.

"Tony?" she asks.

Yep, that paw sure is interesting. He should think about upgrading the miniature wrist structure. Maybe try a retractable dew-claw.

"Tony, sweetheart, *did* your feelings towards Alex change?"

Tony uses his nail to move each individual front claw. Without looking up, Tony shakes his head. Each claw flexes properly in its tiny range of motion.

"I see," Na Anderson says. "Does Alex know how you feel, do you think?"

Tony glances up quickly, then looks back down to the dragon. He shrugs, trying hard for indifference, even though he can feel his heart kicking against his chest like it wants to beat its way out. "I was seeing that shrink. She said I was getting dependent. Gave me some shitty advice. Obie paid for her."

"Kiddo, you started seeing Dr Nichols after your first marriage. I believe you when you say her advice was bad, but Alex took Advanced Composition his very last year here. That was after your third marriage. It's part of why I found your relationship with him so heartening. He made you laugh, and baby, you didn't laugh very often then."

No, Tony hadn't.

Na Anderson sighs a little. "OK. So it must have been when you left here. You decided to hide him, hide your real relationship. Was it to keep Alex safe?"

Tony's grip on the dragon slips and he has to fumble to catch it again, set it on the carpet.

"That's a yes," she says. "Tony, sweetie, what sort of partner would you like to be for Alex? If the world was safe, what kind of role would you like to have in Alex's life?"

"I don't know what Alex needs," Tony says, and his voice is gruff.

"That's a question Alex should answer," Na Anderson says. "I want you to tell me what kind of partner *you* want to be. If there were no limits of any kind, what would you want, Tony?"

"But there are limits," Tony says.

"No," she says sternly. "You asked for my help, so we're going to try this my way. Just for a minute. What kind of partner would you like to be?"

Tony thinks about the lazy summer days he spent out under their oak tree, his head resting on Alex's thigh, tinkering with a screwdriver and a broken machine while Alex absently petted Tony's neck and sketched out a civil site plan.

He thinks about the way it feels to sleep curled up in Alex's bed, surrounded by Alex's scent and Alex's voice, content in the certain knowledge that he belongs to Alex.

Tony thinks of the way Steve's pupils had dilated when Tony had come to him bearing Alex's scent, how good it had felt to offer Steve that, to feel like, in a small way, he was bringing Steve more than just Tony's own broken battered body and heart.

He thinks of the wistful way Steve had stroked the doctor's report that recommended pregnancy, how Steve pays careful attention to Liam, how unphased Steve was over the mission with all the school kids. How much Tony likes being able to count on Steve's solidity and warmth at the kitchen table every Sunday, and even how much Tony likes being taken on actual fucking goddamn couple dates like he's stuck in some dorky rom-com.

Finally, Tony strokes the dragon's ears again, listens to the cheerful squeak. He looks up, meets Na Anderson's kind gaze. "I want to belong to Alex. That's--what I want." His voice is scratchy, but she doesn't say a word when he steals her tea, takes a sip. "I want to belong to Alex, and I want us, together, to belong to Steve."

Her small, work-rough hand reaches out, grips his own wrist, still scarred from twisting in the grip of brutal ropes, years ago. "Then that's what we're going to work towards. I'll make us some more tea, and we're talk about how to get there. OK?"

"OK," Tony says, voice still rough.

Na Anderson scoops the dragon up from its place in Tony's lap. She tucks it close, offers a hand to help Tony up. "While we're talking, how about we give this little fella some repulsor tech? Seems like a dragon ought to be able to fly, right?"

Tony grabs her hand, lets her help him to his feet.

The rest of the afternoon is spent talking repulsors and tech, communication and love, technology and safety, sleep and sex, gravity and circuits, trust and fear.

At one point, the little dragon is ambling around the work table, a not-quite-living bit of mechanical magic, and it occurs to Tony that Na Anderson is right. The dragon is an example of Tony's work as Tony: a flashy and whimsical exterior covering up a belly full of the most paranoid high-tech on the planet.

While they're working, Na Anderson makes Tony brainstorm seven ways to tell Alex and Steve how he feels and what he wants.

No matter how much Tony balks, she just keeps insisting, until finally, she bribes him with the school kitchen's caramel vanilla waffles (usually a winter holiday breakfast only treat) and the promise of a visit to Stark House. "But I'll only come if you not only practice telling them, but actually do tell them. I mean it, Tony, this is important."

Tony, who is trying to remove some caramel vanilla butter sauce stuck in his goatee, just waves a vague hand. "Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first fifteen times. I'll tell them, I'll tell them, pass me the whipped cream?"

She does, and they return to bickering about which of the methods would be best (she has, unaccountably, vetoed Jarvis telling them on Tony's behalf, for some crazy reason).

By the time Rowland texts Tony's phone, they've got a few strategies worked out that even Tony can live with and the dragon is able to hover a good two feet off the desk, besides.

Na Anderson sips her tea while Tony flicks through the texts. "You get called away so often to fix that floating Shield monstrosity," she says. "If you took a weeklong vacation in Canada would I see a clip on the news that an aircraft carrier just fell from the sky?"

"Don't even joke," Tony mutters, peering at the smoking ruins of what had been a lousy patch job by the latest 'mechanics' Shield has hired to work on the Helicarrier. Did someone seriously extend those cables by patching them together with duct tape? Jesus.

"Wasn't really joking," she says. "You haven't told them about my little skills have you?"

Tony's eyes widen and he grabs the dragon and sticks it right next to his cell phone, just in case. "Fuck no."

"Good. I much prefer teaching." She steals the phone and flips through the photos. "Looks like someone was using a cheap aluminum alloy. Swap it out for the G27 xeno-alloy, reconfigure that second panel, and machine down the rough edges of the patch job in the coolant system pipes."

Tony blinks. "How did you know there was a patch job in the coolant system?" The coolant system pipes are in an entirely different part of the damn Helicarrier, and the coolant job had been done by some Army mechanics Shield borrowed two weeks ago.

She's enlarging the second set of photos, frowning. "What? Oh, it had to either be a bad design or a patch job problem with the pipes. You oversaw some of that design, so it's not that. If you reverse the chain reaction, then logically--Tony, can you get me a better photo of this?"

Tony takes the phone back and looks at the enlarged portion of the photo. It seems to be a perfectly ordinary picture of the Helicarrier's many exciting and sadly less-than-perfect mechanical guts. "Probably. Why?"

Na Anderson is still frowning. "The metal section that's mid-gray instead of deep black or light gray? It shows a different paint bubbling pattern."

Tony zooms in and out, and yeah, maybe. Rowland took a picture of the guts that had been filled with smoke from the minor electrical fire caused when the latest mechanics badly wired the circuits. The heat and smoke caused some of the paint to blister and crack, some to just blister, and some to remain relatively fine. "So?"

She gets up and pulls a large three ring binder off a shelf of them. It must weigh a small ton, but she thuds it on the work desk with ease. When she flips it open, Tony sees it's some of her alloy tests. Slim strips of metal, each carefully labelled and tucked in a plastic sleeve-case with testing notes written to the side.

Tony leans over her shoulder as she flips from page to page. Some of the metal strips are alloys he recognizes, and many are shown in various finishes, including some with heat-resistant coatings or safety paint or commonly used marking tools, from grease pencils to surveyor's chalk.

He stop her at 42-STK, which he recognizes as his own titanium-gold. There are more tests on this alloy than on any other she's flipped past so far, even more than she'd performed on the standard steels.

She's tested 42-STK against fire, against acids, against arsenics and bio contaminants, against radiation and pressure-stress, against heavy metals and rare gasses, against sub-zero temperatures and bizarre drugs.

There's samples of 42-STK with paint and samples without, samples with grease pencil marks and samples with 'random environmental exposure of two week duration', samples that have been soaked in some kind of flammable liquid, shocked in a furnace and then dumped into an ice bath.

Again and again, there are methodical notes in pencil in her light architectural hand, dictating results and collating data.

It's a love song composed by engineering, and Tony's probably one of the few who can hear every note of its music.

He smooths his hand over one test, a strange and vicious combination of Oxyuranus microlepidotus venom and rare acids. The strip of titanium-gold is pitted and fried looking.

Beside the slender metal, the delicate chemical formula of the antidote is written not in her usual pencil, but in the bold correction-red of her grading pen.

Tony remembers, a month and a half ago, he'd received a small package from her out of the blue. It had contained two grunge CDs, a pack of Na Freddericks' homemade granola, a tin

of tea, and a vial of milky blue liquid.

This antidote.

He hadn't known why she thought he might suddenly need an omega-safe snake-venom antidote that also happened to render extreme acids harmless, but he'd had Jarvis include it in the new suit upgrades.

Now he knows that she sent it because she'd found a flaw, however small, in his preferred protection and she hadn't rested until she'd given him a way to block that attack.

"Why snake venom?" he asks.

Na Anderson looks at the acid-scarred metal in its protective sleeve. "One of the Floor H kids is on a zombie kick, and he wanted to look into that weird Haitian voodoo powder after reading some horror novel. That got me to thinking about natural poisons, and some of the most powerful are Australian sea snakes. That led me to checking other Australian snakes."

"Good thing I have a mongoose," Tony says, trying to lighten the mood a little. Maybe she was more affected by his trip to the portal in the sky than she let on.

"Good thing," she agrees.

Tony's phone vibrates with another text, this one from Natasha.

"Problem?" Na Anderson asks, flipping to a purple-colored tab.

"No, it's just the left paw letting me know where she's going to meet me. I'm not hanging with Rowland alone anymore." It's still weird, but it's also a relief. Tony occasionally feels like an idiot, but that is better than feeling sheer, overwhelming panic.

"The left *what*?"

"The left paw." Tony glances up. *Meet at Denny's parking lot 19:27hrs.* "Right paw? Something like that. It's Natasha's pack title thing."

Na Anderson's worried frown lightens and she laughs. "The Right Hand. Natasha Romanoff would be a Right Hand. Don't use paw, it's rude, and don't use Left, it means something completely different."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony says, double-thumb-typing his reply. *Will be there. Pls bring my red toolbox. -AES.* He sticks his phone in his back pocket, ignores the buzz when he gets another text. "What've you got for me?"

"You know, if you're worried about Alex's safety, you could speak to Natasha about it."

"Natasha's only guard-dogging me on a temporary basis," Tony says, grabbing the sample book and hauling it close. "Because I'm a delicate flower."

"The Right Hand is a position of very high status in a pack," she says. "It's a permanent position, nothing temporary about it."

"Yes, but I don't think Romanoff believes 'shoo creeps away from Tony' is a move up the career ladder. It's just until Rowland gets a clue." Absently, Tony looks at the alloy sample. M-031, unpainted, heat test. Looks like ordinary gray metal.

"Guarding a pack's omegas *is* a move up the career ladder, and it's one of the benefits of being the Right Hand. Not a chore, a benefit."

"Keeping me safe is right up there with dental coverage?" Tony knows pack-people are weird, but come on, that has to be a joke.

"More like major medical or paid holidays. You want M-031 painted in industrial gray paint 91, heat test." Na Anderson flips forward another page. "If Alex moves in with you, he'd fall under Natasha's aegis. You could go out in public with him, and Natasha would keep you both safe. Any risk to Alex would be taken care of. It would be a matter of honor."

"A matter of..." Tony says, repeating the words because they're so absurd, but he trails off. The M-031 alloy sample that was painted in industrial gray 91 and then subjected to a heat test looks exactly like the photo from the Helicarrier. The paint has bubbled in the same tiny but distinct, almost hexagonal, pattern.

"You see what I mean," Na Anderson says.

"Yes, yes, I do." Tony takes out his phone. "Jarvis, enhance the photo, will you please?"

"Of course, Sir."

They both stare at it, compare it to the test sample.

"Same stuff," Tony says. Which is weird, because he's reviewed the Helicarrier's specs many times, and he doesn't remember any experimental or rare alloys being used in production and he doesn't recognize this metal at all.

"Yes," Na Anderson says. "Can you get me a few more photos? The paint in my sample didn't darken, but the one in your photo did."

"Could have been the smoke," Tony says doubtfully. But then wouldn't the other lighter metal panel have darkened, too?

"Maybe." But she says it like she's humoring him. "I'd feel better if I could look at a couple of close up photos taken with something besides Agent Rowland's cell phone."

"I'll try to get some scrapings," Tony says.

"No," Na Anderson says, flat and sharp.

Tony looks up from the photo, surprised and, well, hurt. Never in all their years together has she ever refused a sample. Hell, he sent her samples from the suit he flew through the

goddamn portal.

Na Anderson lets out a sharp breath. "I'm sorry. But please, Tony, don't take samples and don't spend too much time looking at it."

Tony's usual response to being told not to do something is to turn right around and do it, but this is Na Anderson.

She leans over and points to the sample number: M-031. Then she flips to the purple tab, and Tony realizes it's an index to this section of alloy tests.

M-031: *Xeno-alloy comprised of 22% extra-terrestrial sauropod exoskeleton, 68% terrestrial titanium alloy STRK-12, 3% terrestrial detritus/impurities, 7% extra-terrestrial detritus/impurities.*

"Oh," Tony says.

"No samples, Tony. Promise me."

Tony looks from the miniature hexagonal paint bubbles to his teacher's worried gray eyes. "This wasn't included in your paper for the upcoming Metallurgical Society conference, was it."

"No." She crosses her arms. "In fact, it's not my alloy."

Tony flips to the start of the purple tab. "M for Aliana Martin. These are Aliana Martin's alloys?"

"Yes." Na Anderson is tight-lipped, as grim as Tony has seen her in years. "Aliana put together a number of new xeno-alloys under my direction, here and when we were in New York. We've been preparing a research paper for her."

"She wanted to go to college," Tony says, flipping back to M-031. "Her parents said yes, if it was local, if it was a good school, if there was a chaperone."

"Yes. Our plan has been to get her into one of the city colleges for a year, working with a friend of mine, and then transfer to NYU or U of W. Tony, none of this work has been released."

"She'd use the new alloys to get a paper published, and use the research credit to get into college. She wouldn't risk that," Tony says. "Not knowingly."

"Not unknowingly, either. Tony, the Martins aren't like the Starks. They're not pulling her out of school to go to adult parties where some smooth-talking schmoozer could ferret out secrets."

Tony stares at M-031. "Then someone else came up with the same alloy. That's the most likely explanation." Some parts of the alien carcasses were stolen, as grim souvenirs or just to sell on EBay for kicks. Tony's heard Clint bitching about the grunt work involved in tracking it all down, since it's still not clear how toxic it all is.

Na Anderson is still staring at M-031. She is very protective of her students, and Tony knows she'll fret herself sick about this.

Best to change the subject, at least a little. "Hey, I saw it's made of STRK-12. That wouldn't happen to refer to the work of yours truly would it? Has Aliana got a crush on the finest red and gold engineering marvel the world has ever seen?"

"STRK-12 is a Stark alloy," Na Anderson says, and she sounds even more glum.

"Now what?" Tony says. "You can't tell me it's a super-secret never before revealed Stark formula. It's STRK-12. You always number things in order. That has to be an early version. Something designed when I was ten, right?"

"Nope." She flips the book shut and hefts it back into its place on the shelf. "By the time you were ten, we were way past 12. Besides, you're STK. ST*R*K-12 was designed by Howard Stark, eighteen months before his death."

"Oh," Tony says.

"Yes. It's particularly difficult to make, but it has exceptionally good shielding capabilities. Not as good as STK-69, but that hasn't been released to the public. STRK-12 is a great choice when you want to make a case or covering for hidden surveillance equipment. Adding in the xeno materials made it even better."

"Jesus," Tony says.

"Aliana was hoping to create a hypoallergenic alloy that could be used in joint replacements and pacemakers, that wouldn't be disturbed by microwaves or other equipment. Her grandmother has a heart condition and severe arthritis, but is allergic to nickel."

"But she ended up making the ultimate spy metal," Tony says. "Fuck."

"Fuck," Na Anderson agrees.

Tony's phone buzzes again. It's Natasha. *Found red toolbx. Meet sooner? A. Rwlnd says section 78 panel is smkng. Pls advise.*

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Tony says. "I told them not to crank their thermostats above 65 until I could get there and repair the damn thing. Jarvis, tell Natasha I'm on my way, will you?"

"Of course, Sir."

Na Anderson is giving him a wry smile. "Duty calls, I take it."

"They turned up the heaters in the aft living quarters," Tony says, and she winces. "Yes, exactly. I need to go before there's flames. Again."

"I'll wait up for you."

Tony's stuffing his phone away, and he stops. Usually, he visits on his own terms, but... He can come back here tonight. "Yeah. Thanks."

"Tony," she says, stepping close and giving him a quick touch to the shoulder. "Just take some casual photos when you're working near it. No sampling. No looking at it closely. No chatting to Jarvis about it while you're in their air space. Please. Promise me."

"I promise." Tony makes very few promises, but she asks for so little. He can take a few sneaky photos and resist the urge to poke further.

He gives her his usual goodbye hug, and she hugs him back.

Tony's halfway to the Denny's to meet Natasha when he remembers that he's still wearing Na Anderson's shirt.

Well, good.

Her scent on the worn navy flannel should give that dick Agent Rowland something to think about besides finding new Os for Steve, right?

Chapter 73

Chapter Notes

> *gnaws nervously on thumb nail* OK, this chapter ends on a cliff-hanger. Several folks said they'd like an update, cliffy or no, so here you go!
>
> FYI, this takes place the same evening as the last chapter. It's also the first Alex POV chapter. The next chapter will be Tony's POV, and I will post it Wednesday. Then we get Steve's POV, and I hope to post that Friday or Saturday. You're absolutely welcome to wait until then to read this chapter. Annnnd, lastly: this is a very action/plot chapter, but we'll be returning to more of the Steve/Tony romance in the next two chapters. We're coming up on some more romantic moments, too, in the section after that. My goal is to get Tony the HEA he deserves. OK! With no further authorial nattering, here you go.....

There's really only one problem with being in love with Tony.

The problem with being in love with Tony isn't the late night phone calls or the explosions--emotional, sexual, physical or chemical. It isn't the scandal. It's not the cheating, it's not the chaos, it's not the drinking, it's not the worry, it's not the pain.

Alex hates that.

He's *always* hated that.

But that's not the problem.

No, the problem with being in love with Tony is simple.

When he's stuck in a gas station bathroom in the middle of fucking nowhere, drenched and shivering, confused and sick, unarmed and without so much as a goddamn quarter for the broken phonebooth, the only person in the world he wants is Tony.

No one else will do.

And the sad fucking truth of it is that he loves Tony in that kind of hopeless, helpless, sugary-sweet, pathetic way people do in books written for thirteen year olds.

But Tony?

Doesn't really feel the same way.

Or maybe Alex is just concussed.

Alex swipes at his forehead with his still-good hand. His hair is soaked from falling in the ditch, so whether it's damp doesn't tell him anything. He looks at his hand in the stuttering fluorescent light. There's dark wet *something* on him.

When he angles his hand to see better, a wave of nausea swamps up and over him so fast he has to lean against the disgusting wall.

Don't fall over, don't fall over, don't fall over.

Alex isn't sure how long it takes him to swim back to full consciousness. He hurts a lot, in lots of places, and he doesn't feel good. Trying to figure it out, divide up the pain, trace it to its sources, it's too hard.

He has to get out of here.

Wherever here is.

There's not much in the bathroom he can use. The dispensers are out of paper towels, there's no TP, there's no soap, there's not even a hockey puck cake in the urinal. Just a half-broken light, a dodgy toilet, and a lot of badly spelled graffiti.

No wonder the damn door isn't locked.

Even the mirror is gone--just a couple of holes in the concrete to show where the mounting bolts had been.

Alex sways away from the wall, hoping he's mostly upright, and staggers to the door. It's hard to open using the hem of his shirt, but he forces himself to slow down and slow down and slow down again until he manages it. He can't afford to leave fingerprints.

The gas station parking lot is beautifully dim. There's a bank of lights over each pump, screamingly bright, and a sporadic little flood light over the outdoor ATM, and the rest of the place is blessed darkness.

From the lee of the building, Alex watches the traffic. The cars are going fast--it's got to be a 45 mph four lane, with at least a center turn lane, and no sidewalks. The nearest stop light is a quarter mile to the east, but Alex thinks there's enough of a snarl of light poles to be more turn lanes. That means a good sized intersection, so it must be a major cross street.

To the west, it's darker. Not dark, not completely, but the lights are patchy--probably a low-use business area, lit only at the building entrances.

He can't go west. There's a better chance he'd find something useful, but it's too risky. The lack of sidewalks means people don't walk much here, and he'd stand out even more in the business district with its big empty parking lots devoid of cover and cars.

Alex watches the rain start to spit down again. He'd better not double-back, either.

He shivers in the thin gray tee shirt and wishes, again, he was wearing his own clothes. At least his wool suit pants would hold his body heat, but it can't be helped.

Ducking behind the building, he follows the chain link fence east as best he can.

The strip mall next to the gas station is a bust. The back of it is tidy as a church and empty of everything but recycling dumpsters. There's not even a pay phone.

After that is a chiropractor office and then a dentist.

By the time Alex nears the intersection, he's swaying from side to side.

He's pretty sure he has at least a concussion, and there's something not quite right about his ankle. Walking is getting harder and harder, and wearing nothing on his feet but socks isn't helping. There's no way he's going to look normal enough to cross at the pedestrian crossing. He hurts in places he's trying not to think about, because he can't afford to panic.

The business on the corner turns out to be a wellness center, with a yoga studio and some sort of girly bookstore and a damn therapist office. He wishes to hell the therapist office was a hair salon instead, because there'd be lots of useful chemicals and much less security.

Alex rests against the side of the building, counting his breathing, and waiting for a break in traffic. Whoever did the planning was good at traffic patterns, and there's a gap on both sides at last.

He hobbles across the lanes as fast as he can, forcing his ankle to behave as best he can. His socks slap wetly against the concrete of the road, and he nearly loses his footing on the paint-slick-grit of the yellow dividing lines.

Then he's on the other side.

Ahead of him is another little strip mall. Chinese food, Starbucks, florist, lunchtime deli, and Daniel's Tavern.

Thank fucking God.

Alex just makes it to the first line of parked cars before he sways and collapses against the hood of a little white economy sub-compact. The hood feels like plexiglass, cheap and familiar from hours helping in the garage. Alex's cheek feels stuck to it, cold and damp in the spitting down rain.

He's not sure how long he lays there, but when he forces himself back up, he's a lot more woozy than he was before. Maybe it was the running. Maybe his concussion is worse. Maybe those ribs are really broken.

Alex strokes the nose of the little white Kia, murmurs, "Thank you, darling."

His mind feels like it's suspended in the Karo syrup his mom used in her pies, but after a few tries, he finds an unlocked red Toyota. He crawls through the front seats to the back before he remembers that since he's inside the car he can just pop the trunk. Standing up again makes his stomach pitch and roll, but he's got the little emergency tool kit from the trunk so everything's fine, really.

In the next line of cars there's a silver SUV full of girls-night-out coats and jackets, and it's the best chance he's going to get.

Breaking in is hard, because he only has one working hand and shitty tools and his mind is starting to sort of slide out from under him, the way his ankle keeps doing. He jams his thumb and rips another finger, but he gets the door open, so it's all worth it, because in the pretty light spilling over the dash, he sees the snake's tail of a cell phone charging cord.

Alex isn't quite sure, even much later, how he makes it back to the little white Kia at the edge of the lot.

But he does.

He's curled up in the back seat, shivering. Dialing with one hand is kind of hard, if your thumb is jammed and you keep bleeding on the screen. Jarvis would help him, but Jarvis doesn't live in this phone.

Alex knows he's not supposed to call this line. He'll be in trouble, he knows that, but he's cold. So cold.

He's going to call Ron. That's what he's supposed to do. He'll call Ron, he will, but in a second.

Just for now, he's cold, and his mind isn't really working right, and he's just so cold.

"Who the fuck is this?"

Alex closes his eyes and sighs.

"Seriously, who is this? How did you get this number?"

The phone is slippery, and that should probably worry him. He doesn't mind, though, because everything's OK now.

Well, it isn't, not really.

He's going to be in trouble for this. Really big trouble. Alex sighs again. He doesn't want to be in trouble anymore. "'m sorry," he murmurs. "I'll call Ron. I will. I just--got cold."

There's no answer, and Alex's stomach sinks--really big trouble.

"*Alex*?"

"I'm sorry," Alex says. "I know I'm not supposed to. I just...it's cold."

"Alex, baby, where are you?"

Alex forces his eyes open. "The Kia. The little white one. She has a ding in her front right bumper. Could you fix it, Tony?"

"You're in a fucking *Kia*?" There's a strange thud and then a thump.

"Oh," Alex says. "I shouldn't have asked that."

His eyes slide shut again, and he wonders if it would be OK to sleep here for a little bit. Would the Kia mind? She seems like such a nice car. Tiny, but friendly.

"Don't worry about it, I love to fix cars. Alex, can you tell me where you are?"

"In the Kia."

"And where is the Kia?"

"I'm not really sure." Alex snuggles against the seat back, but it isn't very comfortable.

There's a little pause. "Are you driving?"

"No." Alex gnaws at his lip, and it starts bleeding again. "Tony--Tony, I know you're mad already, but can I ask you something?"

"I'm not mad." Which is weird, because Tony sounds pretty mad. But Tony lies about that sometimes. Says everything is fine, when it isn't. "You can ask me anything. I mean it."

"Oh. Are you sure?" Alex asks.

"I'm sure." And for once, Tony sounds sure.

"OK." Alex pokes at the wet black mud on the loose knit pants they put him in. The pants got soaked in the ditch, but the mud adds a lot to the smell. Brackish and slimy and dark. "Tony--my arm isn't working. I can't really feel it. It just sort of lays there, and I can't move it, and I can't feel it."

"Son of a *bitch*."

Alex winces at the shout, and the phone slips out of his hand. It slides off his chest and skitters under the driver's seat. It's hard to reach under there and brace himself at the same time. He has to lie down and sort of scoot his shoulders forward to get it. The whole time he hears faint noises from the phone.

"Tony?" he sounds breathless, even to himself. "Tony, I'm sorry."

"What happened?" Tony's voice is strained and hard.

"I dropped the phone. It's kind of slippery."

"You dropped the--" Tony stops. "I meant what happened to your *arm*."

"Oh." Alex tucks himself back against the seatback. "I don't know."

"Alex, baby, where else are you hurt?"

Alex looks down at himself. The sodden gray Hanes tee shirt stained with blood, the floppy black knit pants, the once white socks sodden with brown-black mud. "I'm not really sure. I think I have a concussion. My feet sort of hurt, but that's probably the socks. I think there's something wrong with my ankle. I don't like thinking about the other stuff. I don't like it. Tony?"

"Yeah?" The voice is surprisingly gentle, quiet and soft.

"I don't feel good," Alex whispers. "I know I'm supposed to call Ron, but I think he was maybe doing security tonight and I don't know if he'll even answer. I'm cold. Tony, can you come get me? Please?"

"I'll come get you, baby," Tony says. "I'll come get you."

"You will?"

"I will."

Alex shuts his eyes. Tony's voice was holding him, close and warm and safe, but now he's not talking and Alex feels like he's being swung back and forth by a tide of nausea. Seasick on dry land.

"Alex," Tony says.

"Mm?"

"I need you to stay with me."

"OK."

"I mean it. I need you to listen to my voice, and I need you to talk to me."

"You do?" Alex forces his eyes open. It doesn't help the nausea much, but he should try to focus. Tony needs to talk to him. There's mud all over the back seat now, and Alex feels sad about it. Kias have that weird loose-weave fabric upholstery and it's going to be hard to get the rotted mud stink out of it.

"I do. Alex, can you see any blood on you?"

Alex laughs. He can't help it, it's just funny.

"What?" Tony sounds strained again. "This is important. Alex, is there any blood on you?"

Alex looks down at himself, the once heather gray tee shirt soaked with mud and blood like he's been in a charnel house then rolled in a pig sty, the knit pants sticky with wet grass and gore. "A little."

Alex hears Tony suck in a sharp breath, but his voice is calm when he says, "Jarvis says you're on an iphone 4. Do you think you can turn on the video cam?"

Alex shakes his head emphatically, and that makes his ears ring. "No. Huh-uh. Tony, no. No." No way does Alex want Tony to see the gross muck all over him.

Faintly, Alex hears Tony say, "No, you dipshit, I have no fucking clue. Jarvis, port it over, yeah. We're going to need to--are you shitting me with this? Really? *Really*? Well, get me a goddamn satelite feed from the SI 7, then."

Alex lets Tony's irritated tirade surround him. It's soothing.

Tony comes back on, sounding distinctly out of breath. "Sorry about that. I'm trying to find out where you're hurt. If you're bleeding, I want you to put pressure on the wound until I get there. If you've been shot, I'm going to send an ambulance."

"I wasn't shot," Alex says, but this is Tony, and he tries not to lie to Tony anymore. "I'm pretty sure."

"What do you mean, *you're pretty sure*?" Tony's voice is loud and kind of shrill. Maybe he's sick. "Have you been shot or not?"

"I don't know," Alex says. Tony sounds mad again, and Alex feels abruptly guilty. "Tony, I'm sorry. It's date night, isn't it. It's date night with Steve and I shouldn't have called. I'll call Ron, and he can--"

"Do not hang up that phone, Richardson. Do you hear me?"

Tony's so loud Alex has to hold the phone away from his ear a little, so yes, he can hear him. Oh. Did he say that or just think it? "I don't feel very good."

There's a shaky sounding sigh. "I can see that. Alex, I need you to focus for me. Can you do that for me? It's really important."

"I can do anything for you, Tony." Alex realizes he's slowly sliding down the seat back.

Tony's voice sounds cracked, odd, when he says, "I know you can. I want you to just keep talking to me, even if I have to talk to other people for a second."

"OK. You like to talk to other people. Hey--is Steve there? Hi Steve! Hi darling!"

Tony laughs, and he sounds so strange. "Alex, I think you're maybe high as a fucking kite."

"No, I'm in a Kia. They don't fly." Tony should know that. Wait. "Unless you've worked on them. I bet she'd like to fly, sometime. She's really nice. Tiny, but sort of friendly. We should do something for her, if you find me. I guess not a fruit basket, though. Cars can't eat those. Not even your cars."

Faintly, Alex hears Tony say, "I have no fucking clue, but he's stoned out of his gourd, and he cannot feel his arm. I mean it. If you doublecross me on this, I will strangle you with your own entrails, and that's just for starters."

"I understand, Na Stark."

"Why do they have to call you Na?" Alex asks. "You should have gotten something out of fucking those people. Although I always liked the name Stark. Stark Stark Stark. It's a good name. And it's your name."

"Richardson isn't so bad, either," Tony says, but he still sounds weird. "Alex, baby, I want you to concentrate on your body. I know some places hurt, but I want you to listen for sharp fierce pain."

"Is it loud?" Alex asks, peering down at himself. "It's not making any noises. Well. I guess I was squelching when I walked, but that's because of the socks. They were wet."

"From the rain?" Tony asks, and it's so nice to talk to Tony like this. He sounds like he really wants to know.

So Alex answers, more than he'd normally say, since Tony is interested. "No, not the rain. From the drain."

"Which drain is that, baby?"

"Mmm. I think it was a 42-90. You know, Tony, the Coltons aren't making the 42 series as well as they used to. I knew it was going to have problems when I saw the design, but this one was put in heavy clay soil. Can you believe it? There was a good two feet of water and this kind of grossy muck for another foot, foot and a half. Sort of leaves and mud and bracken and stuff. I don't know. But I guess it's just as well, for me."

"Alex," Tony says slowly, as if he's got a bad feeling, which is strange, because Alex's plan had worked out quite well, if he did say so himself. "Alex, were you in one of the 42-90 flood sewers?"

"Well, *obviously*." Tony's usually smarter than this. "Where else would I be? Route 43 only had a few exits, and it's not like it was well travelled. The goons seemed like government, so they'd have sniffer dogs."

Faintly, Alex hears a soft clang and a thud. "Tony?"

"Nope, it's fine. Banged my shin. So, uh, you wanted to avoid sniffer dogs."

"Well, yeah." Alex is sliding down the side of the Kia's seat again, but this time he doesn't fight it. Now his head is hanging off the edge, and he feels like a teenager, talking on the phone to his boyfriend. Of course, Tony isn't his boyfriend.

Although....

Tony's saying something, but Alex interrupts. "Tony!"

"Oh God. What? Alex, baby, what?"

This is really exciting. Of course, maybe Alex is wrong. He's probably wrong. But maybe not? "Tony! Tony, can you be my boyfriend? You said Steve likes hot O on O action, and when alphas like that, sometimes they let their O have an O boyfriend. So, could we?"

There's a pause, and Alex hears a muffled few words, one of which sounds like 'I mean it'.

"You mean what?" Alex asks, interested. "Is Steve there? Is he saying no? Because I could--"

"Steve isn't here," Tony says, sounding strangled.

"Oh," Alex says, disappointed. So Alex can't offer to fuck him. Alphas seem to like that--at least they do when Tony offers.

"But Alex, I'm already your boyfriend."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Alex cranes his head backward at the carpet and a 7-11 cup stuffed under the front seat. "I didn't know that. That's good. I always wanted you to be."

"Well, I am." Tony clears his throat. "Now, since we've cleared that up, do you think you can tell me about the drain?"

Alex opens his mouth to explain about the crack he'd seen--a crack already, the damn thing couldn't have been installed more than two years ago, and it's got horizontal cracks at least two inches wide--when Tony goes on.

"I mean, tell me about these government goons and where you were and the sniffer dogs."

"There weren't any sniffer dogs, I just thought they'd bring some when I escaped. I like them. They sometimes have the malinois with the really pointy noses. Sort of biscuit colored? Like Steve's hair, except nothing like Steve. He's not high strung."

"No, the malinois are just like you. Tiny, with big sharp pointy teeth and more guts than sense. Government goons, Alex. Why were you escaping government goons?"

"Well, they did kidnap me." Alex props his bum ankle on the top of the seat back. His mind is sort of sparking now, and it's kind of nice. "They stuffed me in some van--it's always a van, isn't it? You should get Shield to outlaw vans. Then they took away all my clothes. I thought that was rather rude of them."

"So, what did you do?"

"I killed them," Alex says absently. "It took me a while, though, because I didn't have my gun. Or my knives. They took those and Tony, I think they threw them away. Even my lighter. I love that lighter. But they had some sort of medical tray. With the stuff laid out? You know, Tony, it's like a little fabric paper towel on top of this metal tea tray, and there's oh, all these different scary sorts of things."

"What kinds of things, Alex?"

"Like, a syringe, and a couple of those chopstick-looking probe thingies, and a little blue bulb, and some kind of little bitty knives, and a speculum--they look kind of like clear plastic duck bills, very silly--and then there was some scissors. Regular scissors, not those surgical ones."

There's no answer from Tony. Maybe he's busy. Or maybe he's drinking coffee. Alex hopes so--Tony loves coffee.

"So, I palmed the scissors when they were rooting around in some little cooler, and then I stabbed the first one in the throat so he wouldn't make so much sound, although he did gurgle a lot, and then I got the other one--" Alex doesn't want to think about that one. It was upsetting. "I don't want to do that again, OK?"

"You won't have to," Tony says softly. "What about the driver?"

"He was armed," Alex says. It was terrifying. "But I'd been pretty sneaky quiet, so I just crawled to the back. I had to wait until the van slowed down, but there weren't that many stop lights on R43, because it's only sorta semi-developed?"

"Alex, you mad motherfucker, did you jump out of a moving vehicle and climb into a storm drain?"

"I'm not mad," Alex says. "You always say that. I'm not mad. Not all of us can be loud explosive geniuses, you know. My mind is very sleek. Sleek and sneaky. Sneaky. Sneak, sneak, sneak."

"Jesus Christ," Tony mutters. "High as a goddamn--yeah? Good, that's good. Should I put us on speaker?"

It must be Steve at last. "Hi Steve! Hi! Tony says he's my boyfriend now, OK?"

"Oh for the love of--" Tony sighs. "Alex, it's not Steve. There are two people with me."

"Is Honey there? Hi Honey! I was going to ask you about this story Terrence told me, about this Greek pledge, but--"

"Alex," Tony says, and he sounds exasperated. Whoops.

"Sorrrrrrry," Alex says.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're talking. But the two people with me are Dr Boyer and Agent Rowland. You remember Agent Rowland, don't you?"

"Isn't he the one I wanted to roast over a spit and feed to the pigs?"

There's a startled sound, and Tony is laughing, his real laugh, not a fake one. "That's the one."

"Lots of people don't know it, but pigs are omnivores." Alex adds proudly, "We learned that in school. Sometimes they eat people."

"Uh, yes, yes, we did learn that. You knew it already, though, you crazy backwoods Southerner."

"Aren't you precious. That's gentleman farmer and Virginian to you, nouveau riche boy."

"I'd have paid good money to hear you drawl that at my father."

"I was happy to, but you said nooooo." Alex pouts at the Kia's carpeting. "He was at Della Keller's soiree with your mom, and you know my mom went to school with Harmon Keller." Not only had Tony said Alex couldn't tell his dad that, he'd expressly forbidden Alex from even meeting Howard. Which, given Alex's mother's Southern manners, had taken some serious planning, an 'accident' with red wine, and the sacrifice of Alex's favorite waistcoat.

"One of my few moments of sanity," Tony says, but he sounds fond. "Agent Rowland, say hello to my boyfriend."

"Good evening, Na Richardson," someone says. It's a tenor, and it sounds like an alpha.

Alex sniffs. "I'm married, you jerk. Is your intel that bad or are you just constitutionally incapable of acting like an adult who passed kindergarten?"

"I apologize," tenor says quickly. "It's, ah, a pleasure to speak with you, N--Sa Richardson."

Alex kicks absently at the seat back, bored already. "Yeah, hey. Put Tony back on. It's important. Tony--do you remember after your dad was an asshole at the UN and tried to garrotte you?"

Alex hears Tony sigh heavily. "He didn't actually try to garotte me. He just--"

"Strangled you a little? You had bruises around your neck for two whole weeks! I hate that man. Hate him hate him hate him hate him." Hate, hate, hate. Howard was a hateful, tiny dicked, creepy-mustachioed alpha *asshole*. The car that killed him deserved a medal. Honestly.

"Alex. What did you want to know?" Now Tony sounds kind of long suffering.

Mention of that rat bastard would put anyone in a dark mood. "Do you remember the blankie palace?"

"Do I remember the blankie palace?" Tony says, and his voice has changed to exasperation again, but Alex is sure he's not really mad. He sounds almost cheerful. "Do you mean, do I remember when you stole the couch cushions from every last spare piece of furniture in the upper and lower dorms and squirreled it all away in the unused upper drawing studio? The one where you also stole Evangeline Petty's best sheets and Isaiah Keith's blankets? Not to mention all the extra pillows from the medical rooms? And chocolate from the kitchens? And the high tensile nylon rope from the engineering studio?"

Tony's just getting going, really.

"And books from the library and a television set from the PE teacher's rainy day classroom and a set of tapes from Vic Ewing?"

"Xena," Alex says, remembering. "And Quantum Leap. I wanted to get some early Buck Rogers, because of that robot, or the other show--the one with the Danger Will Robinson. But all I could really do was Next Gen."

"Data's not just a robot," Tony says, voice soft and gentle. "He's an AI. That's better."

"Mm," Alex says. He's getting tired. "You liked it, right? The blankie palace?"

"I liked it. Even if everyone did blame me for the thefts."

"I confessed," Alex reminds him. "I threw myself on Na Everly's mercy."

"Yes, but since you were always confessing for my little mishaps, nobody believed you!"

"I guess I shouldn't have done it," Alex says. His eyes are closed. God, what a long day.

"No, I'm glad you did. I was pretty messed up. A week alone didn't help. It was--it was nice, when you dragged me off to that room up there."

"You should have seen your face. Your eyes kind of bugged out. It was really funny." And when Alex was getting the tapes set up, he'd seen, in one of the mirrors, that Tony scrubbed at his face. He'd never said anything about that, though, just hauled Tony into the tunnel that lead to the blankie palace's inner sanctum, where they could curl up in a bunch of stolen blankets and pillows and eat too much junkfood, safe from the rest of the world and away from Howard fucking Stark.

"I bet," Tony says, but he still sounds odd. Almost wistful. "Alex, what made you think of that?"

"Mmm. Dunno. Visiting you. Maybe we can have one."

"You want a blankie fort, I'll make you a blankie fort beyond your wildest dreams."

"'kay." It sounds nice. Alex's eyes drift shut. So tired.

"Alex? Alex!"

Tony's voice sounds tinny. Alex's hand slipped, and it takes work to put the phone back to his ear. "Mmhm. Sorry."

"Alex, you can't--"

But Alex can't really listen any more. He's just too worn out, and he doesn't feel good. His dead arm is hanging there, still listless, and his ankle is throbbing, and his mind keeps sparking strangely. Spark spark spark.

Alex forces himself to hold the phone up again. "Just a sec, OK? I just need to..." Something. He just needs to something.

Then the phone slips from his hand and bounces away. Alex tries to grab it, but his upside down head aches, and he misses.

There's noises coming from the phone, so at least Alex can find the damn thing. It's hard, hard work climbing up onto the seat with just one arm and a sparking mind, not to mention the ankle. And the ribs.

The seat of the Kia looks kind of gross--smeared with red and brown and black, all of it smelling awful.

Alex sways a little and he's just about to crawl back under the passenger front seat to get the phone back when he hears something.

He looks around, and there's some sort of bright light, shining in the handicapped spot of the Starbucks and the Daniel's Tavern, and then a small plane slowly lands.

Alex claps his hands together gleefully, or tries, but only one arm responds.

Tony's come to take him home.

Chapter 74

Chapter Notes

> First... A03 keeps adding these weird 1. sections. I think I've removed them at last, but can you tell me if I missed any?
>
> Second, thank you for all the fantastic comments!! I shall be posting the next bit Real Soon. Shooting for Friday. In the meantime, enjoy!

Tony's crouched down, arm in the guts of the Helicarrier's piping, ripping out wires by hand and swearing creatively when Jarvis says, "Sir, call coming in on the 404."

Tony's head comes up so fast he nearly cracks it on a pipe. "Crank call. Has to be." But his heart is pounding already, far too fast for its own good.

The silence, at first, makes Tony think it *was* a crank call, but then Alex's voice comes on, tentative, woozy, injured.

Trace it, trace it, trace it, is all Tony can think, as he tries to answer, tries to find out where the fuck Alex is.

Natasha's already up, hand on her weapon, but she doesn't say anything.

Tony nods to one of the other quinjets, and Natasha shakes her head.

Tony types "Someone has to find the fucking goddamn kidnappers, asshole" on his phone, holds it up for her to see.

Natasha frowns, not at being called an asshole, but at the order, Tony is sure.

She isn't going to want to be separated, not now.

"DO IT," Tony types. Because he's really in no mood to argue, he adds, "Is it your fucking JOB or not??!?"

Her eyes narrow, but her gaze darts to the nearest plane. He has her.

*

Tony's own favorite quinjet is souped up with various Tony-friendly supplies. Explosives, charges, weapons, tech, even some of Na Anderson's wretched anti-nausea tea.

If Tony wants to take it on a joy ride to test the quinjet's ability to sync with the Helicarrier's newly upgraded systems, well, who the hell is going to argue with him, right? He'll just bitch that no one understands how he does his work, and it's not like anyone else on the planet is smart enough to tell what's bullshit and what's brilliance.

Besides, Jarvis has just murmured, "Inside SHIELD systems, Sir. I am removing the alert that will announce this jet's departure."

Jarvis does so enjoy hacking SHIELD.

Tony's feet are scampering up the little ladder when--

"Na Stark, what are you doing?"

Rowland? Right now?

Really?

Tony whips around, and he should feel bad about it, he really should. But he doesn't. He just feels calm.

His gun is levelled right at Rowland's chest.

Rowland doesn't look frightened, but he does look confused. "Why are you stealing a quinjet? Do you need assistance? It's not protocol to go on a mission alone anymore, Na Stark."

Oh my fucking God.

Tony waves the gun, pointed a few inches from the guy's chest.

Jesus, what is he going to do? He can't leave Rowland in the hangar bay, because the guy will tattle as soon as Jarvis slams the quinjet door. He sure as fuck doesn't want him along, because duh, no. But shooting him in cold blood seems kind of, well, mean.

Alex would, though, if it was Tony's life on the line.

Tony tries to brace himself.

"I'd be happy to assist in whatever capicity is required, Na Stark," Rowland says.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

This cannot be happening.

Which is when Alex murmurs that he can't feel his entire goddamn arm and then goes radio-fucking-silent, and Tony loses the rest of the shreds of his tentative sanity.

*

Inside the quinjet, Tony's got a satelite feed slapped up on whatever monitors are handy so that he can see a fuzzy view of Alex's Kia sitting in the goddamn parking lot. Jarvis keeps informing him sotto voce that Tony's heartrate skyrockets whenever some drunk Midwestern yahoo in a fugly jacket and Dockers staggers out of Daniel's Tavern.

If only Alex wasn't hurt.

Tony watches another guy come out of the bar, fish his keys out of his pocket, dejected because he didn't get lucky.

Please don't drive a Kia, please don't drive a Kia, please don't drive a Kia.

"ETA to St Teresa Memorial Hospital is three seconds, Sir, Agent," Jarvis says. "The most likely candidate to assist our injured Sir is a Dr Boyer, head of Emergency Medicine, Omegological Subspeciality. Hospital records indicate she is on shift. Secondary candidates are Dr Wu or Dr Jensen."

Tony's fingers are a blur on his keyboard as he writes code on-the-fly to identify and locate likely kidnapping vans on the traffic-cam photographs for Natasha, while trying to keep Alex on the line at the same time.

It's a huge fucking risk to allow Rowland to grab the trauma doctor, but Tony's slapped a couple of trackers and a bug on him, and Jarvis can be even more vicious than Tony when riled. Rowland will have Jarvis as a hunting companion, and while Rowland may not be aware that Jarvis has already hacked the hospital's shitty security feeds, Tony sure as fuck knows.

Tony needs to get Alex medical assistance--not just an EMT, but someone who knows what the fuck they're doing with an omega's body.

But Tony also has to make sure that no goddamn government goons get to Alex's location before Tony does. God fucking dammit--if only he was sure that Alex was well enough to survive being carried by the suit. Tony suspects the cold and the wet and the gravity pull might kill him.

Fuck fuck *fuck*.

Jarvis pilots the quinjet down onto the hospital trauma unit's helipad, and Rowland briefly looks like he's going to lose his lunch. Yeah, Tony forgets what weenies everyone else is about flying. Well, get over it--there's no time in this business to be a wimp about a couple of extra G-forces.

*

To Tony's surprise, Rowland hustles Dr Boyer up the little ladder a solid twenty seven seconds faster than Jarvis's estimate.

*

When they're getting close to Alex's location in Missouri (*Missouri*--what the hell?), Tony calls Natasha again. "What have you got for me?"

"Nothing yet." Natasha's crisp voice sounds frustrated and annoyed. "My contacts don't know of any planned snatch-and-grab of a high-level target. The satellite feeds don't show any significant areas of disturbance, there's no police scanner activity, and the traffic light cameras on Route 43 have identified several hundred vans. I'm narrowing it by your parameters."

Tony wants to scream. "Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Yes. How is he?"

"Out of his goddamn mind and high as a kite," Tony says. He swallows hard. "He's just gone radio silent. Jarvis says the phone is picking up breathing as background noise, but J may be trying to make me feel better."

Natasha swears in Russian.

"No kidding," Tony says. "Jarvis?"

"T-minus two seconds, Sir. Agent Rowland, please assist the doctor to hold still, combat landing."

Jarvis loves the combat landing, but Tony doesn't think he's doing it for fun this time. The precise control necessary to slam the brakes that hard, that perfectly, is something that the tech specs consider outside human ability, but Jarvis doesn't bother trying to hold himself back.

They slam towards the ground, gravity a hard pull, then the plane touches down feather light.

*

"Na Stark," Rowland says, and he's frowning. "I'll cover you when we retrieve Sa Richardson."

Tony looks him up and down, grunts. "Jarvis, where are you on the data I requested?"

"According to FBI, CIA, and Interpol files, no mission to acquire Sir has been authorized since the Kretek debacle." Jarvis pauses and adds, delicately, "There are no SHIELD missions authorizing it, either."

"Thanks, J. OK agent, follow me and bring her." Tony swings a toolbelt around his waist in case he needs to dismantle the Kia doors. You never know what a paranoid Alex might have rigged up. "My mark."

"Yes, Na Stark," Rowland says.

*

Jarvis opens the door.

Tony doesn't bother with pretense. He runs flat out the whole way there. Rowland, thank fucking God, runs after them. Since Rowland's holding a gun on her, the omega trauma surgeon runs, too.

It's only a couple hundred yards.

A few car lengths away, Tony slams to a halt and holds out his arm. Rowland stops, too, looking around. "What?" the agent asks.

Tony taps his earpiece. "Alex? Alex, do you have the phone back?"

There's no answer, but Tony sees a head pop up over the back seat of the Kia, looking a bit like a river otter surfacing. Alex waves one arm--his left. Then he stops, looks around vaguely, disappears.

"Good," Tony says to Rowland.

"Good? Are you sure he didn't faint?"

"I'm sure. He's just disarming the booby traps." Tony looks around, but he doesn't see anything. Whatever Alex set up, it's well hidden.

After another moment, the head is peering cautiously over the back seat, and all you can see is eyes and a damp looking tuft of hair. This time Alex is making a peace sign.

"Finally," Tony says. "Let's go."

When Tony gets closer, his stomach starts to hurt. The front nose of the Kia does have a dent, but that's not what Tony's worried about. It's the smear of red-brown, stark against the cheap paint job.

Rowland's gun is at his side, but he says, "Do you think it's safe to open the door or--"

Tony's already wrenched it open. There's a sickening whiff of dank drainage ditch and drying gore, but Tony really doesn't give a shit, because there's Alex. Damp, woozy, and swaying.

Tony crawls in the backseat, ignoring the surgeon's babble about spinal injuries.

To his surprise, Alex scrambles forward and buries himself against Tony, as if he's trying to climb inside his shirt. All he says is, "Tony."

"OK," Tony says, wrapping his arms around the shivering mess of his best friend. "OK. I'm here. Shhh." He's not good at comfort at the best of times, and this really isn't the best of times.

"You came."

"Yeah, baby, I came." Tony kisses Alex's hair, and then really wishes he hadn't. "What the hell happened to you? You taste like a swamp and you smell like a butcher."

"I'm not really sure," Alex says absently, then sweet and uncertain, "Tony, can I come home with you?"

"Yeah, baby." Tony wraps his arms tight around Alex and just holds on. "You're coming home with me."

Chapter 75

Chapter Notes

I owe everyone a sincere apology. This is the worst year I've had since 1985. I found out that my work branch will close at the end of December. I can't say much about how it was announced, but the whole mess really dealt a hard blow to my self-confidence. I know, emo writer, yada yada. But this was--tough. For a while, all I could think when I looked at the page was 'you have no business playing with these awesome characters, who do you think you are'. Etc. But, while I'm not the best person in the world, I am damn stubborn. I reminded myself that I am the only one who knows how this story ends. Also, I refuse to let the jerks of the world win. This isn't the best story, but it's *my* story. I'm going to tell it, and neither rain, nor snow, nor fog, nor rampaging Leviathans are going to stop me. Ahem. So. Uh. Enjoy the new chapter! Sorry for the delay.

Also, since several folks asked-- if you need to contact me directly, I'm venusm1944 at gmail.com , but I love comments here best because I can read them with the chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Steve gets home and walks into the living room, he feels a curious sense of deja vu.

There's Tony, on the couch, feet propped on the coffeetable. The muted TV is running the stock prices, but Tony's obviously not seeing them. He's thinking hard about something, using all of his considerable concentration.

Curled into his side, just like before, is a blanket wrapped figure. A little bigger this time, yes, but in the exact same position as the toddler, nose tucked into Tony's side, hiding against him.

And, just like last time, Tony's arm is curled protectively around them.

There's even a faint scent of brown sugar and butter, warm chocolate and walnuts. Someone's baking cookies.

Steve got the update on his way home and he recognizes the scent, but he asks anyway. "Who have you got under there?"

Tony strokes the blanket very gently, and it shifts a little. "This? This is a little mongoose I found today. He followed me home and I decided to keep him."

The blanket makes a soft inquiring sound, and Tony pets it again. "Would you like to come out and see Steve?"

It rustles around in an agitated fashion, and Tony sighs. "Shh. It's OK. You just stay right here." Looking at Steve, Tony adds, "Our mongoose had a bad day."

Steve can still smell the distress, but the scent is not as bad as he expected. "I'm sure the cookies will--"

But Tony's making frantic slashing motions.

The blanket gives out a sad little growl.

"Did they not turn out?" Steve looks at the kitchen. "I can make some more. Or there's homemade pecan sandies from when--"

The blanket makes the most pathetic little noise Steve's ever heard.

Tony hisses, "For God's sake, Steven, shut up. The doctors called ten minutes ago. He can't have anything with fat until tomorrow at the earliest. I'd been coaxing him to do things with talk of the--the things, and now he can't have any, OK?"

"Cookies aren't good for mongoose anyway," Steve says. "But I bet I can find something that is."

Tony shoots him a grateful look, and Steve slips away.

In the kitchen, Steve piles a little tray with saltines, slices of banana, applesauce, rice, and several glasses of applejuice and ginger ale.

"Jarvis," Steve says, pitching his voice low enough so the omegas can't hear him, "the latest report says Sa Richardson was beaten. Does he need a straw? Ice packs?"

"According to the medical reports I have read thus far, Sir was not beaten in the face. He should not require a straw. Sir has been attempting to apply ice packs, but has given up for the time being."

"Hm," Steve says. "Do they hurt too much?"

"I believe the visit to the hospital did not go as well as had been hoped," Jarvis says, and his voice is bone dry.

Uh oh.

"Is it still standing?" Steve asks. "The hospital I mean."

"For now." Jarvis's voice carries a chilly note that Steve hasn't heard before.

Steve winces and carries his supplies back to the living room. The tableau is the same, except that Tony's turned the TV off.

"See, it's gone completely," Tony's voice is coaxing, but all he gets is a sulky growl.

"No more bad show. I promise. The bad man isn't on the TV anymore. He's all gone. I turned him off. I didn't see him when I pulled the blanket away, OK? I didn't mean to--" Tony sighs. "Don't you want to see Steve? You love seeing Steve. Come on, Alex, he's brought you treats and everything."

Steve sets the tray on the coffeetable. "It's OK, Tony. He's had a rough day."

Steve knows that Tony's had a rough day, too. Tony's freshly showered, and his hair is still extra curly from the damp. If not for the shower, Steve is sure Tony would reek of pure panic. Steve could smell the lingering remains of it in the hallway leading down from the helipad on the roof.

Even now, despite Tony's coaxing Alex to greet Steve, Tony smells fiercely possessive, protective. Anyone else walking in the room would probably be greeted by the gun Tony has tucked under the pillow next to him. Steve can't see it, but he can smell the gun oil.

Steve uses fussing with the food as an excuse to take a deep inhale, because he can scent something else.

Under the heavy iron and mine mine mine is a quiet vein of rage, brutally controlled, muted.

Whoever hurt Alex Richardson is going to be very sorry.

Steve takes one of the saltines and places it next to the blanket. Then he sits down by Tony, on his other side. "I've heard that mongeese are very fond of crackers. How did the medical visit go?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve watches a slim hand slip out from under the blanket, unerringly grab the cracker, and then disappear again. There's a soft little crunching sound, and Steve smiles.

Tony flops back and covers his face with his hands. "Badly. It went badly."

The blanket growls in agreement.

"Oh?" Steve frowns. They were supposed to update him--but no one had. "What happened?"

"He bit three nurses and the head of surgery."

The growl goes deeper.

"Yes, I know they started it," Tony says, as if he's contuing an argument.

The growl shifts again, a sort of up-down grumble.

"I'm not saying otherwise," Tony says, glaring hard at the wall. "But--" He stops, obviously frustrated.

The growl softens.

"Fine," Tony says, crossing his arms. "But look--there were more of them than there are of you. What if I hadn't come back in time?"

This time the blanket snarls softly.

"I know. And it's sweet. But if I hadn't showed up, they'd have gotten the other restraints slapped on you, and you'd have been *committed*."

The smell of distress and fear coming off Tony is edging to the panic-reek Steve had smelled when he walked in. As bad as the night Rowland had triggered a panic attack. As bad as when Steve had asked Tony about Fromm and Tony'd had to recite pi.

The blanket rustles and then Alex's head appears.

If it wasn't all so fraught, Steve would laugh. Alex is--well, he is extremely clean. So well scrubbed that his cheeks are still faintly pink, but his hair is....

There's no other word for it. Alex's hair is fluffy. Fluffy and soft looking, and Steve wants to pet it.

But Alex isn't looking at Steve. He has eyes only for Tony, and he slinks into Tony's lap, the blanket somehow clinging to his shoulders.

Tony looks down at him, scowling. "What? Are you going to apologize for making that surgeon get stitches in his right hand?"

Alex sniffs, disdainful. He looks oddly regal with the blanket draped over his shoulders that way, but the effect is ruined when he gravely holds out half a saltine.

Tony looks at it. "What the hell?"

Alex looks at his half-cracker, then breaks it in half again. Looking pleased, he holds out the bigger piece.

"I am surrounded by the fucking cracker police," Tony mutters.

Alex leans forward, offering it, and now his eyes are big and sad.

"Oh for God's sake," Tony says. He looks at the cracker. "For me?"

Alex curls agains his chest, offers the bite right at Tony's mouth. Insistent. Hopeful.

Tony shoots Steve a stern look, and Steve pretends to seriously contemplate the wall so he won't laugh. "We're never speaking of this," Tony says. "Never."

Then he opens his mouth, and Alex pops the cracker bits inside.

Tony chews, rolling his eyes. "Thank you. That was lovely. Salt and flour and boringness. Mmmm."

It's the wrong thing to say, because Alex immediately whips around and takes more crackers off the tray. He lets the blanket fall off, but Tony carefully tucks it up around him again.

Alex breaks each cracker into four exact pieces. He feeds Tony the first two pieces, a bite at a time, then he leans over and stares at Steve with a beady-eyed expression.

"I don't think--" Steve tries. Up close, Alex's fluffy hair and dilated pupils make him look more than a little crazed. He smells like heaven and Tony, and faintly, weirdly, of something that reminds Steve of home, when he was young.

"If I have to, you have to," Tony says. "Fucking suck it up. This was your idea. Eat your damn cracker."

Alex snuggles closer to Tony, but he's still staring intently at Steve. It's all wrong, to Steve. They should be the ones feeding Alex.

But Steve opens his mouth. Alex places the cracker bit delicately in his mouth, then watches intently until Steve's chewed and swallowed.

Then the omega happily sits back in Tony's lap and crunches his own tiny bit of cracker (the smallest part, Steve notices) with relish.

From his expression, Steve suspects Alex is pretending to gnaw on the bones of his enemies.

Alex demolishes the rest of the crackers the same way--four pieces, two to Tony, one to Steve, the smallest to Alex. He starts eying the applesauce, and Tony says, "Steven, if he tries to feed me with a spoon, I will--I will--"

"What the heck did they give him at the hospital?" Steve asks, watching as Alex, having decided applesauce is not for Starks, sets it at the very far edge of the coffeetable.

Tony takes the glass of ginger ale from Alex and says, "For me? Thank you. Why don't you sit here between us now? I think Steve gets cold."

Alex climbs onto their legs and into the tiny space between them and begins draping Steve with his blanket. He drapes Tony, too, and then curls up into a tiny ball again, with his head on Tony's thigh and his feet and half his butt on Steve's. It has to be lumpy and uncomfortable, but Alex seems perfectly content, and his breathing evens out almost immediately. He's completely covered by blanket, and Steve has to admit, he does feel a little warmer and a lot charmed.

Tony looks fondly down at their fluffy mongoose. "He's a bossy little thing, isn't he? Even stoned out of his goddamn gourd."

Steve reaches over to pet him, stops.

"It's safe. He likes you." Tony moves the blanket a little, exposing the shock of soft brown hair. He runs his hand through it, again and again, never taking his eyes away from Alex.

Steve risks petting Alex's hip where he's all curled up. The blanket shifts, sighs, relaxes.

"See? He likes you." Tony's clever mechanic's fingers scratch right behind the delicate shell of Alex's ear, and there's a soft whiff of warmth and arousal. Alex stretches a little, snuggles in deeply, like he's seeking out Tony.

"Lap mongoose," Tony whispers. "That's what you are. A lap mongoose."

"Tony," Steve says, petting Alex from the top of his spine all the way down his hip. It's relaxing.

"Mmm?"

"Tony, I asked you a question. You've avoided it three times now. What happened at the hospital? What did they give him?"

Tony pets his lap mongoose, scratches behind the ears again. "Rowland came in useful. I was surprised. I sort of kidnapped him, and then I made him kidnap me a trauma surgeon who specializes in omegas."

Steve has heard some of this already--from Rowland--who characterized Na Stark's actions as 'quick-thinking and expedient in difficult circumstances'. "Tony, the more you dodge and weave, the more worried I get."

"Alex's arm was dead when I got there. That's what he asked me when he was on the phone. Tony, my arm isn't working. I can't really feel it. It just sort of lays there, and I can't move it, and I can't feel it." Tony shuts his eyes. "Stupid mongoose. I told Rowland about it."

Steve clamps his teeth together, because the twists and turns of Tony's mind mean it's possible he's getting to the point. "What did Rowland say?"

"Rowland said--" Tony grimaces, like even remembering the man doing a good deed is irritating, and Steve kind of agrees. "Rowland said that he knew of an assault drug that would do that, the arm thing. It's not common, and it's a rare side effect."

"What drug?"

"You wouldn't recognize it, but it's called Zypralex. It's used by the CIA, though, and it's really hard to make. Almost impossible. I talked to Tom--he's a top guy, OK, so you just need to take my word for that part."

"I always take your word on research, Tony."

"Yeah, you do. Sorry, I'm just--"

"Hey," Steve says. "Tony, it's OK. When we're done talking, we'll find a way to relax."

Tony laughs, but it sounds a little hysterical. "Right. So, uh, where was I? Zypralex is basically a knockout drug for omegas. They load it in a tiny syringe and slap somebody on the back, or they shake hands hard, or hug them, something like that."

"Gosh."

"It's really fucking expensive, or kidnapping would be a popular sport. Most of the time, it gives the kidnapper some time to get their target away, because it makes the victim look drunk. It also affects the verbal center of the brain, so people can't match their thoughts to words and say, Help help."

"That's terrible. So, this is what made his arm go numb?"

"Yeah." Tony grabs his ginger ale and knocks it back like he wishes it was whiskey. "The arm they inject it in goes numb--or leg, if they do it there. Anyway, after we got him in the quinjet, Rowland was all, 'This is quite unlikely, Na Stark, but--' and we checked Alex over and found the little bump and got it tested. Zypralex."

"So that's why he's so--" Steve pets Alex again. "He doesn't really think he's a mongoose does he?"

Tony laughs. He laughs so hard he has to lean on Alex, whose head pops up, and he peers around blearily, then makes a delighted sort of grumbling noise and starts trying to wrestle.

The two omegas are suddenly thrashing around on the couch, wrestling and mock-fighting and nipping and sometimes kissing and generally causing a playful ruckus. Tony's laughing and Alex is making cheerful sounding wordless noises--at least Steve knows it's because his language center is offline, which is a relief--and then the two are wrestling around right in his lap.

Which is way more erotic than a post-kidnapping debrief ought to be.

Steve's peering down at them, hoping like hell they'll kiss again and equally hoping they won't notice how hard he's suddenly gotten, when one of them accidentally elbow-checks him in the solar plexus.

Steve lets out an oof as all the breath leaves his body and he doubles over.

Suddenly two pairs of eyes are peering at him up close with identical worried expressions and surprisingly similar crazy hair. The omegas sniff him cautiously, nuzzle his shoulders and neck. Checking him over for injuries, Steve guesses, as he tries to drag in air again, although what excuse Tony has for the little thoughtful wordless 'hm-hm, hm-hm' noises, Steve's not sure. Tony Stark's verbal centers can't have been offline a day in his life.

"Were you two worried about me?" Steve asks.

Alex ducks back, expression suddenly nonchalant, as if that would be silly. Tony gives Steve's neck another cautious sniff, then leans heavily against Alex, who noses his ear.

They've clearly tipped a little into instinct--Tony was far more worried about Alex than he'd let on. No wonder Tony'd taken several showers--he didn't want to send Steve into fight with his distressed scent.

The two are going to be inseparable for the next several days--not that Steve would think of separating them anyway.

Both omegas are kneeling on the floor, and Alex, for all his casual indifference, keeps sneaking little air-scents in Steve's general vicinity. Tony just leans against his buddy and stares frankly at Steve, as if by staring, he'll make certain Steve is OK.

"I'm fine," Steve says. Words don't really help much once omegas tip into instinct, though, so Steve adds, "Why don't you two come back up here." He pats his lap, expecting both omegas to duck away again--Tony's still shy when he's worried, and Alex doesn't know him well, yet.

But both omegas climb right up, and Steve lays back down on the couch the long way so there's more room. Normally, he'd expect Alex to be on the outside, guarding Tony, but Tony rudely shoves Alex towards the couch back, growling so low it's more a vibration than a noise.

Alex noses the back of Tony's neck, and then meekly lays down, plastering himself to Steve.

Tony fussily arranges his gun to within easy reach, shoots Steve a guilty look, and then takes out what appears to be a large machine gun from under the couch, and moves that, too.

Finally, Tony lays down, and Steve tucks him close. Tony's head is on his chest, and it's easy to run his hands through Tony's hair, smooth the wild curls.

"Now," Steve says, feeling much more relaxed himself. If he gets Tony to talking, keeps him close, makes sure his mate is safe and relaxed, there's a good chance he'll bring Tony out of instinct entirely. "How about you tell me the rest of it? What's this Zypralex stuff do?"

Tony snuggles closer. "You know when you pet my neck, I go submissive, right?"

Steve watches a sneaky mongoose paw reach over and start stroking the neck in question. To Steve's surprise, Tony doesn't pull away. He just closes his eyes and sighs a little.

"Yes," Steve says. "Yours is pretty distinctive, but most omegas get at least a little more compliant when their special places are touched."

"Yeah." Tony arches his back, like Alex's touch feels good. "That's how Zypralex is designed to work. It affects the nerves of our pleasure centers--not the genitals, exactly, but the omega erogenous zones. That's why it's got such unpredictable side effects."

Steve eyes their mongoose, who has now also wrapped one leg over Tony's, pinning him. "I've been wondering where Alex's zones are. What they do."

"He has three, like me," Tony says. Like before, in the helicopter, his voice is slurred a little, soft. "Right behind his ears, his low back, and--elsewhere."

"I thought you just had your neck," Steve says.

"No," Tony says, clearly distracted because Alex's hand is now tracing the join of butt and thigh. "Yeah, there, but it's only skin on skin, and it's not as sensitive as my neck. Quit that, you. It's not gonna work through my jeans."

The hand returns to the neck, scratching gently.

Tony leans into the touch. "Better. Anyway. Um. Where was I?"

Steve starts petting Alex again, stroking from shoulder to elbow on his bad arm. At least it's working again. Steve hopes the petting will help a little--it had to have been frightening to lose all feeling in your dominant arm. "Alex's erogenous zones."

"Yeah. See, I get, like extra submissive and slutty. Alex doesn't, exactly."

"May I see?" Steve asks. It's wrong and rude and--but the words escape before he can stop them.

Alex raises his head from Steve's shoulder, peering at him curiously. The omega doesn't smell upset or annoyed, just curious.

Tony turns a little on his side, so he's facing Alex. Alex lays his head down on Steve's chest, closer, within easy reach. Tony's clever hands trace right behind the shell of Alex's ear.

Nothing happens directly, but the warm earth smell sweetens, and it smells even more rich, like freshly exposed loam, as lovely as the triple-dug beds in those amazing gardens in France.

The iron ore twines through it, grounding it even further, the hints of smoky forge and sunlit rock making the earth solid.

If you bottled this scent, you could sell it for a million dollars. You could use it to lead any high level alpha around and around by his nose. Steve's pretty sure that he could get drunk off this.

When Steve opens his eyes, Tony's looking right at him. "You like this."

"Yes."

"Should I stop?"

"Heck no." Steve's arousal is heady, but he can still think and plan, and if someone did break in to get his omegas, the grounding scent will drive him into Fight much faster and much deeper. He'll be able to protect them, no matter what. But.... "Keep talking. I want to understand."

"OK." Tony has that agreeable sweetness he got on the helicopter. "Um. So, he gets kind of snuggly and handsy."

"Playful, too," Steve says.

"He's always playful," Tony says absently, and Steve realizes that Tony's so deeply under he's accidentally telling the truth. Steve needs to be careful--not ask questions that aren't fair to ask him.

"Does he get more submissive?" Steve asks, because Alex is sprawled on his chest. That's much closer to an alpha than Steve would have ever expected him to get--although maybe not. Alex did climb right into his lap in the park.

Tony laughs. "No. At least, he never did with me. He bossed you into eating your share of the crackers. But he does get more....agreeable? Look, it's kind of hard to say what Alex's e-zones do to him."

Alex props his chin on Steve's chest, staring at him frankly, as though he's curious about this turn in the conversation.

It reminds Steve that it's really not fair to ask these questions, not when Tony's under, and not when Alex himself can't answer. "So, the Zypralex made him woozy and unable talk. Is it __"

"No, no," Tony says, interrupting in that surprised science voice he uses when he's reminded that not everyone can do advanced physics calculations in their heads, mid-fight. "The Zypralex didn't fuck up his ability to speak. The antidote did that."

To Steve's surprise, Alex starts scooting down, turning away, head tucked down, almost clumsy in his attempt to climb off Steve.

"Shh, hey, no come back," Steve says, trying to keep his voice gentle. He knows he's added a lot more alpha-pheromone oomph when Alex's back goes stiff, shoulders hunching.

Damn.

"Shh, Alex," Steve says, trying again. Should he risk touching Alex or will that make it worse? Alex is making quiet little noises of distress, and he smells oddly of shame. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

That doesn't seem to have any effect.

Tony grabs Alex, and Alex stops trying to scoot away.

Steve watches, fascinated, as Alex continues to look away. Tony leans in, close, and rubs his nose against the line of jaw and right under the ear. Not just submissive, but revelling in Alex's scent, marking himself. Tony turns, sliding closer, until he can rub his cheek against Alex's.

It's a gesture Steve hasn't seen in—

It's been years since he's seen an omega be that overt, almost feral, in their need to touch, to be comforted, to bury their face in another omega's scent. Like back then, Tony is almost compulsive, shivering a little. Not afraid of Alex, Steve is sure, but afraid for Alex.

The last time Steve saw this, it was Jolene reassuring herself that Karin was alive, here, safe. Back with the pack, away from the battlefield.

Steve remains still until Alex slowly relaxes under Tony's touch, until eventually, Alex makes a grumbly, growly sort of noise and nuzzles Tony right back.

That seems to be a mutual cue, and both omegas snuggle back down, their cheeks resting against Steve's chest, so close that Tony's long wayward curls tickle Steve's nose.

Steve's a little worried he might break the spell of calm by moving, but if he doesn't, his left arm will go numb, serum or no serum. Fortunately, curling an arm around each omega's shoulders doesn't seem to bother them. Alex even yawns, and Tony snuggles himself closer.

This is clearly the end of the debrief for tonight. Tomorrow morning, Steve will share the information he gathered at the initial crime scene. By then Natasha will be back, too. His friend Seargeant Olson should have an update on the condition of Alex's men. Maybe they'll even hear from Clint.

In the meantime…

Steve risks losing a hand and begins to pet them both. Long, sure strokes, from the top of their shoulders, down their spines, and then slowly back up again.

The earth and ore surrounds him, and Steve's eyes are half-lidded. He knows he can spend all night just like this. All senses alert, as aware as if he was awake, but his body caught and held by the peaceful breathing, the scent of sleep, comfort, home.

The spell of their warm weight twines around him, relaxing him enough to allow Steve's mind to truly focus on the questions that he turns over and over again.

Who stole Alex? Why? What did they hope to gain? Did they get what they wanted—any of it? Will they strike again—and where? Was the repair on the Helicarrier part of that gambit? Or a separate one?

And, as Steve sorts suspects and weighs possibilities, his mind reflects on something else, turning the questions this way and that.

Why was it the *antidote* that took away Alex's words?

And why was Alex so ashamed of it?

Chapter End Notes

I am planning to post an out-take tomorrow. It's a snippet that I discarded because it didn't fit the timeline I chose, but it has no spoilers and is sort of warm-hearted and sweet. It's a bit of a 'thank you' to my many kind readers. I'm going to post it as a related, but different story, not as a chapter to this.

Also, please tell me if I've missed any random numbers in the text? I was really tired when I posted this, and I wanted to hit publish before I lost courage.

Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay. I ended up getting sick (gee, why, my life's been *so calm lately*), but I'm better now. I hope to get more posted soon.

Steve is waiting up, sketching to pass the time, when Natasha finally returns home. It's late, nearly dawn, and when she steps out of the elevator, Steve watches her hips sway like a metronome. It's a sure sign she's exhausted; only when relaxed and safe does Natasha let go that particular disguise.

Steve sees the instant she catches the scent of the omegas. Her body stiffens, just a fraction, then she continues her glide forward, stopping a perfect and correct two and a half feet away.

She doesn't even look past his shoulder to where the three omegas are curled into a single pile. Clint dropped Honey off a few hours ago, and Honey's presence would be a perfect excuse to ask about them.

Steve can tell that his Right Hand is prepared to give her report right here. Sure enough, Natasha straightens her shoulders, raises her chin, parade rest.

"Come sit," Steve says, patting the spot right next to him on the plush couch cushions he'd spread on the floor.

When Honey arrived, Steve had taken the opportunity to rearrange things. Omegas sleep better together, and it wasn't hard to lay couch cushions and pillows on the floor next to the wall. Steve had moved some furniture around the edges, to create barriers.

Flanked on either side by bookcases, armchairs, and end tables, it's an easy to defend little nest. As soon as Steve sat down to guard them, they'd fallen into deep sleep.

Now, Natasha's gaze darts behind Steve.

The omegas are so entangled in sleep that it's a bit hard to tell where one begins and the other ends, especially since they're tumbled in blankets and all of them are wearing Tony's sleep clothes. Steve's sure that it's Tony's back that is resting gently against Steve's spine. Honey's foot is poking out from under one edge of blanket—Steve recognizes the Flamingo pink toenail polish, and Steve knows Alex is in the middle. Not because Steve can see him, but just because that's how it works.

"Come sit," Steve says again, patting the spot next to him.

Natasha's nostrils flare, and her eyes widen in confusion. She comes and sits next to Steve, folding her legs carefully, her weight so even she barely disturbs the cushion.

In another time, with another pack, Steve might have pushed for the report first. Not today. Under the graceful moves, Natasha is growing more and more tense.

"They're safe," Steve says softly. "They're safe and they're very fond of each other."

"Sa Richardson was injured," Natasha says. Her scent remains muted, and Steve wonders at the cruelty that instilled such brutal control even in these circumstances.

"Yes." Steve gently moves a bit of blanket aside, and the heavy scent slowly rises. It's warm, a little like cloves, Steve's always thought. Earthy, sensual, spicy. The unmistakable scent of omegas, sleeping together, safe.

Natasha slowly leans towards it, breathing deeply, then freezes.

"It's OK," Steve says, gentle. "It's our right."

Natasha doesn't move. She isn't retreating, but for the first time, Steve can smell the tiniest hint of lemon-sharp fear from her.

Asking about the fear would push her away, so Steve draws the blanket back just a bit more to reveal the shock of wild brown hair that belongs to Alex.

Steve smooths back the wild hair, scratching gently just behind the ear. He's rewarded with the soft sleep noise omegas make, and then Alex snuggles deeper into the others. This sets off a little chain reaction of comfortable snuggling, and afterward, everyone's breathing goes a little deeper and slower, more relaxed.

It makes Steve smile, and he finds he's doing it again, just slowly stroking the soft brown hair, wild from the adventure and whatever shampoo Tony'd needed to use to get rid of ditch mud.

"They've gone a little feral," Steve says. "But they're all fine. See?"

Natasha nods, a smooth, perfect movement. "Thank you, Cap."

"It's our right," Steve says again. She probably won't be able to feel that, not yet, but maybe soon. "So, tell me."

That simple command does more to relax her than any of his other attempts. Her shoulders loosen a trifle, the hint of lemon eases, her lashes lower as she glances at the omegas then back at Steve.

"I found the van some hours ago, as I reported. It was dumped 37 miles from where Stark picked up Richardson." Her mouth tips up at the corner, just a little, a private smile. "It took me nearly fourteen minutes to put out the fire, I'm sorry to say."

"Naturally, as an experienced field agent, your first priority was to secure the scene, not report back to base," Steve says, the same earnest voice he'd used on Command back in the day.

He's rewarded by Natasha's eyes twinkling back, all innocence. "Naturally." She sobers. "The front of the van was impossible. It got too hot. We'll get whatever the crime lab people choose to tell us, and whatever Stark can get from my personal cam. The back was still in good shape when I arrived."

"I thought it exploded."

Natasha grimaces. "It did. There was a container of oxygen and some kind of rig under one of the seats. I didn't see it until I'd climbed in."

That's not good. Steve'd hoped Natasha had set the explosion somehow, perhaps with Jarvis's assistance, after she'd gotten the intel. If it was set by the villain, then Natasha won't have been able to explore the wrecked van.

The disappointment must show on his face, because she says, "I did get some information before I had to leave."

"And?"

"There were two bodies in the back of the van, both male, both dead. They were in prime physical shape, military or government agency body-type, both wearing suits—wool and poly blend. They had one gun, according to our scan, but I wasn't able to identify the make and model."

"Military or agency body-type." Steve has been worrying about little else. "You think this was a sanctioned hit for Sa Richardson's criminal acts?"

"No. They'd never have taken him in a medically equipped van. The tools were gone by the time I got there—the driver must have removed them before he set the fire. There were shelves and drawers and hooks left behind. They match Sa Richardson's description."

"So you didn't get any other information?" Steve's disappointed, but he tries not to show it.

"I got DNA samples. I'll have Stark run them tomorrow." Natasha glances back at the omegas. "I did find out something else."

"Oh?" Steve isn't sure what to make of her tone.

Her gaze shifts to the omegas again, and the wintry scent of her rises, sharp and cold, the tea note almost gone. "Do you know the most vulnerable part of the human body?"

Steve has been in combat for years. "The heart."

"No." Natasha smiles, as chilly as her scent. "The heart is guarded by the ribcage. It's a tough target. And it's not the genitals, either. It's the eyes."

Steve goes still. "The *eyes*."

"Oh yes." Natasha looks at the omegas, back at Steve. "Very few people even think of the eyes as a vulnerability. It's an accessible target, and if you hit it, you can go straight to the brain. Most people never try it, because humans are hard-coded not to injure each other that way. At the most, they'll toss sand, maybe tear gas."

Steve feels a little queasy just thinking about eye injuries. "OK. So?"

"So, Sa Richardson told Stark that he'd killed one of them in the throat." Natasha meets Steve's gaze, holds it. "The other had been killed by shoving a medical probe right through the eyes. First one eye, then the other."

Steve swallows hard. "Well."

"Yes." Natasha's smile remains, curving up at the edges of her mouth, an amusement that Steve does not share.

"Well," Steve says again, because he has no idea what else to say.

"I wasn't able to gather much more data from the scene. They left the van about fifty minutes outside the junction of I-70 and I-35."

Steve cocks his head, glad for the subject change. "Those highways are before my time."

"The center of the country—I-70 runs east and west, I-35 runs north and south." Her mouth kicks up again. "Big crossroads for chopshops, because they can send the cars on anywhere in the US. Hard to track."

"So, you think that's where they were headed. This intersection of highways." It makes good strategic sense, but there's something not quite right about it. Steve can't say what. It just doesn't feel right. Why travel by van in any case? Wouldn't a private plane be more private? Faster? Easier to slip under the radar?

"No," Natasha says slowly. "SHIELD does, provisionally, but I don't." One shoulder raises a fraction, practically a shout from her.

"So, what do you think?"

"I think the whole situation doesn't make much sense." Natasha's eyebrows draw together, and she glances back at the omegas. "What did you and Phil find?"

Steve hands over his sketchbook. "According to Jarvis's best guess, Sa Richardson was at a party in DC when he was taken."

"DC? He was supposed to be in Seattle." Natasha flips through it, looking over his sketches of the house interiors and external grounds. She stops at Steve's careful diagram of a house plan.

"According to Jarvis," Steve says, "Sa Richardson was in Seattle early in the day, but flew out to DC at the last minute, for a party. He thinks. Sa Richardson did not file the usual flight plans with his firm, and he made the flight into Manassas Regional instead of Dulles or Reagan."

"That's a small airport," Natasha says. "Not a private one, but Sa Richardson's family has strong ties in Virginia. He probably owns people there. If he wanted to come in quietly, that would be a good place to do it."

"According to Phil, if Sa Richardson really wanted to come in quietly, he could go to a fully private airport. Phil thinks the Richardsons probably own one somewhere."

"Maybe that would be too obvious," Natasha says slowly.

"That was Phil's take. That Sa Richardson was meeting someone who would check up on where he landed. Someone who he wanted to put at their ease." Steve does not have a happy feeling about the whole mess. The kidnapping had been beautifully orchestrated, and Sa Richardson's defenses had been thorough and well thought out.

"This is the house?" Natasha asks.

"Yes. It belongs to Representative Pendergrass. His wife was throwing a party for the Washington elite, and according to Phil, Sa Richardson is a Washington insider because of his family's connections to Virginia and their bank holdings. Not to mention his own business interests. He'd be on most guest lists." Criminal or no.

Natasha looks at the schematic. Her finger traces the west balcony. Steve has drawn in the shrubbery, the gate, the grounds. He'd used green to indicate the bullet casings he'd found, and red for the blood stains. "What's this purple outline?"

"The range of the EMP bomb. Jarvis says the best guess for the range is ten yards." Steve traces his finger over the purple line, taps an off-center spot. "I'd have put it here. That'd get anyone on the balcony, where I think Sa Richardson would wait for whoever he was going to talk to. This stone wall here would make sure the bomb didn't go through into the house much."

"Enough to knock out any equipment and phones on his bodyguards, but not alert the house or raise suspicions." Natasha tracks several paths from the balcony to the grounds. "Do we know what he was doing there? Who set him up?"

"Not yet. When I got home, Sa Richardson was non-verbal." Steve looks over his shoulder to where the omegas are curled together, breathing deeply, sound asleep. Steve looks back at Natasha. "All three of Sa Richardson's men were taken out."

Natasha's fingertip traces the bloody red pen marks on the page. "Did we recover the bodies?"

"They weren't at the scene, but yes. I got a text from Phil about an hour ago. He and Clint found them under the Amtrak Anacostia Bridge, washed up. Phil thinks they were dumped

there to make it look like a rival drug gang did it." Steve glances at Natasha, lets out a long breath. "One of them is alive."

Natasha looks up quickly. "Alive?"

"Alive," Steve agrees. "Barely. That's where I sent Clint. He's taking him to some of my friends up north. He was in very bad shape—shot, then thrown in an icy river."

"That's good, though," Natasha says. "The cold would slow the blood loss."

Steve grimaces. He hates everything about icy water. "Yes, well, he's barely alive. They're not sure he'll be able to remember anything even if he wakes again. They think he was hit bad enough that he seemed dead."

"Sloppy," Natasha says, eyes narrowed.

"Very," Steve agrees. "I can only hope that—well, look at this." He pulls out his phone and carefully taps at it for a while. The picture means nothing to him, but he's started researching how this modern science works. They can use microscopes that take photos of even the smallest cells now.

"Where did you get this?" Natasha asks.

"From under Sa Richardson's fingernails. Tony thought they should gather it, before the medical doctors went to work."

"Cunning," Natasha murmurs. "Got them good, didn't you. No wonder they had to drop the men."

"You don't think they'd planned to?" Steve asks, surprised.

"No," Natasha says, just as surprised as Steve. She looks back at the omegas, frowns, then looks up at Steve. "I forget what a good man you are."

"Hey," Steve says. Jeez.

"No, no. I mean—if I had done this op, I would take Sa Richardson's men." Seeing Steve's face she says, "Alive, Cap. I'd have taken his men alive. Torture for information is an art form. Not everyone will crack under physical pressure. Most omegas won't. The research is quite clear."

"People have researched how to torture different types?" Honestly, what is wrong with this century?

"Yes," Natasha says, implacable. "If you want an omega to talk, you don't physically threaten them. Their bodies can be quite fragile, of course, but mostly, it just doesn't work well. If you threaten someone they care about, they--"

"I get it." Steve cuts her off. He feels sick to his stomach. "They'd have wanted to take Sa Richardson's men as bargaining chips. Tell us what we want to know, or we hurt them."

"Yes." Natasha shrugs. "He fought hard, though, even drugged. Maybe made some noise. They had to kill his men instead of just taking them. What kinds of wounds?"

"It looks like small caliber gun shots and knife wounds. Phil's getting autopsies done now. He's having someone named Chavez do them. Phil said Chavez will give us a three or four hour lead time before giving the results to SHIELD."

"I'll go over and see for myself."

"No," Steve says, firm. "You'll stay here. Phil is taking care of the autopsies."

"Then I'll—"

"Natasha." Steve keeps his voice calm, smooth. "You're staying here."

"I'm good for hours yet, Cap. I can tell a lot from a body. I may be able to tell what agency the kidnappers were from."

"Phil is taking care of it," Steve says again. "No, don't argue. Let me finish."

Natasha's mouth is set, her eyes glittery, and her scent is sharpening again, this time the biting cold edge rising hard. Anger.

"When I got home, Sa Richardson was non-verbal." It's hard, so damn hard, to speak the words out loud, even though he's telling Natasha.

Her eyebrows draw together and she glances back at the omegas again. "You said that before. I thought you meant from trauma. That he wasn't ready to talk."

"No." Steve runs a hand through his hair. "I mean he was like an omega in instinct, but different. Very instinctive, very affectionate with Tony, but totally unable to talk."

Natasha's always hard to read, even when she isn't trying to hide her expression. Her habit of hiding is so ingrained it remains even now. "The Zypralex could do that. It should stop when he came out of it, though, and I heard the recording. He was verbal when he called Tony."

"Yes." Steve forces the words out against his desire to hide any vulnerability, no matter how small. "He could think, could plan, could talk. Tony told me that the non-verbal side effect came from the antidote, not the drug. Jarvis says that's not a recorded side effect in the FDA database."

"Well, that's not so unusual," Natasha says slowly. "The drug is mostly used by the CIA on enemy combatants. They wouldn't report side effects."

"It had to go through trials, here and overseas, before being denied approval for prescribing. There's nothing in the scientific reports. Jarvis hacked the researchers' databases. I want you to stay here, because you're the best at getting information. You can judge when it would be safe to ask Alex about his experience, and you'd be the one who could find out what his reactions mean."

Natasha blinks, a shout of surprise from her. "You want me to interrogate him?"

"I want you to—" Steve lets out a deep breath. "Yes. We have to find out who targeted him and why. If you think it's safe, completely safe, then yes, I'd like you to ask him."

"You think they had something in mind besides holding him hostage for information or negotiation." Natasha's wintry scent, already cold, goes suddenly flat.

"Yes." Steve meets her eyes. "Alex was--upset about being unable to talk. Tony said that the drug works on an omega's erogenous zones. Now, I haven't known too many dominant omegas, but they're not a new phenomena. In my day, they were considered valuable."

"They're considered valuable today," Natasha said slowly. She turns and looks down at the pile of omegas under the rumpled blankets. "The conservatives, especially, value them. But Cap, whatever Sa Richardson's personal sexual preferences may be, he's not—I don't know whether he'd be taken for that."

Steve looks, too. While they've been talking, the other omegas have curled around Alex again, and he's completely hidden by blankets and entwined limbs. "Why not?"

"Today, there's an official register for omegas. Every omega must have a Klennecky score recorded on their government ID, starting at age thirteen."

The lowest legal age for marriage in the states. Steve grunts. "So, Alex's score doesn't show his dominance?"

"It doesn't show anything." Natasha raises one shoulder. "It's a placeholder score. Some families file a motion with the courts, and instead of using a real score, they use a kind of generic score."

"Wouldn't using a placeholder score in itself tell people the omega was unusual?"

"It depends. Maria Stark had a placeholder score her entire life, even after she was married and bonded. No one would have been able to use her without Howard Stark's consent."

Steve's old war buddy was perfectly capable of building bombs that levelled cities. It was hard to believe that Howard could be pressured to lend out his bonded wife against his will. His son, though... "The scores are genetic, aren't they?"

"Partly. That is, a very high level omega and a very high level alpha will likely produce a high level child, but it's not an exact science. There are other factors at play—some studies suggest that different omega lines can have more or less influence on a child's level. The Roanokes, Tony's line, are famous for producing healthy offspring, but not necessarily high level offspring."

"Tony is very high level, though."

"Yes." Natasha glances at Steve. He must be pouring off possessive pheromones like nobody's business. "Many omegas with placeholder scores aren't special, they're just from wealthy families who believe the law is intrusive."

"So, it's something the Richardsons might do anyway." Interesting.

"Yes." Natasha glances down at the omegas again. "I'll see what he has to say. What else do you want me to do?"

Steve tucks a bit of blanket up over Tony's bare foot. "Keep them safe until I'm back."

Natasha looks up sharply and no wonder. Most alphas wouldn't leave the pack omegas in the middle of an incursion. "Where are you going?"

Steve smiles, but it isn't very nice. "To visit an old friend."

She doesn't ask for details, which is just as well, since he wouldn't answer, but her gaze follows him all the way to the elevator doors. His last glimpse is of her adjusting a knife in her boot, guarding the omegas.

Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is short for narrative effect. I'm finally feeling better, so I should have more soon. Also, I'd like to say thank you to my dedicated readers, who've been incredible. Thank you--it means so much to me that you're reading this.

Steve has no trouble climbing the big oak, even in the dark and the sleet. In this fancy body, walking along the big tree branch to the mansion's balcony is as easy as strolling down a Brooklyn sidewalk—he dodges small branches the way he used to dodge ladies carrying grocery bags and tough guys carrying their pride.

It's an easy leap onto the railing and it takes no effort to overpower the little window lock. The top notch security system, like most inexperienced soldiers, didn't anticipate an attack from the sky.

Steve listens for a long moment, but the house remains still. He slips inside, bellying over the sill and leaving sleety footprints on someone's fancy powder room floor.

It takes only a few tries to find what he's looking for.

The office is opulent in a way Tony's home never bothers with. Where Tony has pristine white wool carpet or broad-planked hardwood, this room has Persian carpets stacked on top of each other until the whole of the floor is covered. The bookshelves are maple, polished bright, and hold more knickknacks than they do books. The vases are the kind you'd see in a museum, but they hold hot house flowers anyway. The furniture is antique and each leg ends in a lion's paw, the re-upholstery done in oxblood brocade, as staid as it is predictable.

This office doesn't just whisper money, it shouts it to the rooftops.

Steve sits down in the oversized leather chair. He props his muddy boots on the priceless desk and settles down to wait, all the lights off, for his prey.

It doesn't take long.

Corporal Beckett looks the worse for wear, even if you figure in a fifty-some year time lag. He's using an electric scooter, oxygen tanks tucked in back, and tubes in his nose. The medical device strapped to the side of the scooter is displaying numbers and graphs, their green digits bright as a neon sign in the dark room.

Steve waits for Beckett to shut and re-code the door lock, then he flicks on the desk lamp. "Hey, Jimmy. Been a while."

As Steve expected, Beckett's good at bolting, but Steve can move fast—a lot faster than the old man Beckett's become. Steve's between the scooter and the door before Beckett can hit the keypad that will summon assistance or signal a break-in.

"Get out of here, Rogers."

"Now, Jimmy, is that any way to talk to your old friend?"

"We were never friends."

Beckett's arthritic hand goes for a pouch attached to the scooter, but Steve gets there first. He's got the med-alert button out of the pouch before Beckett can reach his hand in the pouch. "You know," Steve says, "that's not what you said in your interview for Captain America: the Legend and the Man. According to that documentary, we were bosom buddies."

"Like you never lied to the troops," Beckett mutters, but his gaze is fixed on the little device in Steve's hand.

"Not like you, Jimmy, old boy." Steve meets Beckett's eyes, tightens his hand on the device, lets the tiny broken shards drop to the floor.

Beckett flushes a mottled red, an ugly contrast to his pouchy gray skin, and he looks away. "What do you want?"

Steve leans back against the door, casual and easy. "Who kidnapped Sa Alex Richardson?"

Beckett flinches, and Steve just raises his eyebrow.

"I'm an old man, now, Rogers." It sounds an awful lot like begging, like a plea, but it doesn't give Steve any pleasure.

"Who kidnapped Sa Richardson, Jimmy?"

It takes a little bit of arguing, just as Steve expected, but after a while, Steve knows he's nearly there. "Tell me what I need to know."

"I'm telling you—they'll kill me if I talk."

"Past time, by my reckoning," Steve says. "Jimmy. Everyone else in this world thinks I'm a boy scout, but you know better."

"This isn't a tent in Normandy, this is—" but Steve cuts him off.

"No, this isn't a tent in Normandy. The parallel you want is that little village near Breslau." Steve meets Jimmy's eyes, knows the man is remembering the same things Steve is. The stink of burned fields, the dead soldiers draped over the stone fence, the reek of rot. Smudges of smoke, dark against a winter sky.

A village, burning.

All the color drains from Jimmy's face, leaving it as ashy gray as the stones Steve had climbed, back then, to retrieve his people. "You wouldn't," Jimmy says, but his voice isn't steady.

Steve leans forward a little, speaks nice and soft. "Wouldn't I?"

Jimmy shuts his eyes. "It was the NSA. They've wanted Stark for years. They thought if they could tip Stark into getting with one of their top men, they'd have leverage, be able to use the omega act of '52 to push him into marriage."

"And how does kidnapping Sa Richardson fit into this?"

"The NSA watched the other agencies make a play for Stark after he came back from Afghanistan. Some of them tried to use drugs to induce a heat, but it's clear from Stark's medical records that chemical inducement isn't safe."

Steve's jaw goes tight with the effort to hold back words he cannot say. Not if he wants Beckett to keep talking.

Jimmy swallows, the noise an old man's raspy rattle. "But Richardson is different. They thought if they could induce Richardson, then Stark would fall into a synched heat. They've been lovers for years, and since Richardson is a virgin, he'd be more susceptible to an appropriately matched alpha's pheromones. That first time can create some powerful feelings, and if it was chemically amplified, then…"

Then Tony'd fall into heat, too, and the two omegas would fuck the alpha the NSA had chosen. If the NSA chose well, they'd get Sa Richardson to bond with the alpha, maybe even drag Tony into a partial bond with the two of them. Given a virgin omega, given the long history between Tony and Alex, given unlimited chemical resources, it could work.

"Rogers, that desk is over five hundred years old."

Steve opens his eyes, looks at his hands. The perfect, polished desktop is crushed and splintered where Steve's hands are gripping it. "I'm going to need names."

"Look, Cap, I know you're upset, but they didn't even take Stark directly—"

"You have two choices, Jimmy. You can tell me the names, and I walk out of here, do what you know I'm going to do, leave you to what's left of your life."

"Or?"

Steve looks squarely at what was once a fellow soldier. "Or I summon my pack for a formal hunt, seek reparations in blood from every single person involved. Including you."

Jimmy's hands tremble as they grip the arms of the scooter. He looks frail, an old man surrounded by the treasures he's gathered over a lifetime of government service—or a lifetime of looting battlefields in wars fought by others.

“Tom Goodson. Lance Weaver. Jamal Evans. Dennis Connolly.” Jimmy adjusts his oxygen tank, opening up the flow. Steve can hear the hiss of increased air, the whistle as Jimmy tries to catch his breath. “Goodson’s in charge.”

Steve stands, looks down at the shell of the man who’d been Corporal Beckett. “I absolve you of further reparations in this matter.”

“You don’t want anything else from me?” Beckett sounds suspicious but relieved. Even his little medical graph is calming down. Worthless little worm.

“Sit there and do nothing,” Steve says, stepping out onto the balcony, back into the black night and the sleet. “You always were good at that.”

*

Tom Goodson isn’t the official head of the NSA. He’s listed as ‘Senior Analyst, Field Office,’ but his pay is five Federal grades above that of the other analysts and only one grade below the Director.

His security is better than Jimmy Beckett’s, but it doesn’t give Steve any trouble. Not after he asks Jarvis for assistance.

*

Lance Weaver is one of the bodies in the van. Steve got the ID update from Natasha, who’d heard it from one of Phil’s friends in the Coroner’s Office.

*

Jamal Evans and Dennis Connolly are in a late night meeting discussing satellite feed upgrades. It takes a couple hours for them to leave the warm confines of the Pentagon building.

Their cars don’t have any security at all.

Chapter 78

Chapter Notes

> I know I keep saying this, but I say it because it's true. My readers are the very best. This past year has been a very hard one for me, and I haven't had a lot of time. So many of you have left kind comments or sent me notes, and while I haven't had time to reply, I wanted to take a moment and tell you that--it may sound cheesy, but those notes, those comments, they kept me going through a really dark time in my life. I cherish them.
>
> When I started posting this story, I didn't think more than one or two people would read it. Probably the friend who urged me to post, and maybe a bot.txt, you know? But I decided what the heck, maybe someone else would like a more hard-core deep world-building take on this trope, and here we are. *sniffles a bit* OK, I'll stop. But seriously--never doubt the positive effect a kind comment can make in a person's life. Thank you. Sincerely.
>
> In other news, I should have more chapters ready shortly!

Steve's finished his shower and change and is shaving off his stubble in the locker room at Shield Headquarters. They'll want to yell at him, and Steve has no intention of leading anyone, even Shield, *especially* Shield, back to Stark House.

The badger bristle brush and soap dish are gifts from Tony, who somehow knows which things Steve misses most. He's finished his left cheek and chin, is starting on his throat when he sees Rowland in the mirror, walking towards him.

"Agent," Steve says, still shaving. "Come to fetch me for the court martial?"

Rowland rests his hip against the sink. He's wearing near-civvies—it's the first time Steve's seen the man in something other than a suit. Soft gray Shield PT tee shirt, heavy sweats, running shoes. "Nope."

Steve finishes his throat, rinses the razor, gets to work on the right cheek, scraping slowly. "No?"

"No." Rowland's got dark circles under his eyes. He clearly hasn't been home since he helped pick up Alex. Steve can smell the faint omega fear-scents clinging to Rowland's skin, the tinge of swamp. "No prosecutor in the land would charge you. Not with that level of provocation."

Steve rinses his razor, puts it away. The modernity expert Shield had given him made it clear that the laws were much stricter than they'd been in Steve's day—you couldn't just go around

killing people for hassling your omegas. "Really."

"Really." Rowland sighs. "Once physical force enters the picture, physical retaliation is more or less allowed. Given that a virgin omega from a good family was genuinely kidnapped, given that there was an actual conspiracy among numerous alphas and betas… Nobody's going to prosecute you."

"What a relief." Steve starts packing up his dop kit.

"Even though it was, technically, cold blooded murder," Rowland says, voice still calm and straightforward as always.

"Not to me," Steve says. He's got the rest of his kit packed up. All he'd wanted to do was wash off the blood, clean off his Fight stink, make sure he wouldn't upset anyone when he got home. As soon as they're done with him, he can go home.

"No." Rowland crosses his arms, looks at the floor. "There is one small….wrinkle."

Steve goes still, turns. He knows his gaze is far too hard, far too dangerous, but he doesn't stop.

Slowly, Rowland looks up, meets Steve's gaze. "House Richardson doesn't believe reparations have been meted out."

But Steve had taken care of the instigators. Had he missed someone?

It must show on his face, because Rowland holds up a hand—stop. "The Richardsons are an old family, and they're domiciled in Virginia. According to the Virginia state law, excuse me, the Commonwealth of Virginia, a family may, if their virginal omega is stolen with premeditation and malicious intent aforethought, claim a blood price as well as physical and monetary reparations."

Steve keeps his gaze hard and level. He's pouring off serious hormones, falling back into Fight. "You're telling me that the Richardson family is beginning a blood feud against the National Security Administration?"

"That's what I'm telling you." Rowland holds his hand out again, right against Steve's chest. "Wait. I'm not done. Sarah Richardson showed up at the NSA headquarters with three lawyers, seven bodyguards, a State of Virginia Supreme Court Judge, and Na Stark."

"*Tony* was with her?" Steve would have bet a hundred dollars that Tony wouldn't leave Alex's side for a good week or more.

"Oh yes. He brought a lot of very damning evidence—emails, voicemails, even video."

Rowland's hand is still there against Steve's chest, and it would be easy, so easy, to break the man's wrist and move past him, go to Tony, make sure of his safety—

"As of now," Rowland says, louder than he's ever spoken, a near shout, but it's just as well—Steve's ears are beginning to rush with rage, the blood pounding fast and hard, his vision

edging in red. "As of now, I said, the Attorney General has recommended the NSA pay the double dowry fee. That's a traditional middle ground, and even under Virginia law, that is a suitable substitute for the blood price. With, your, ah, actions taken into account, it should more or less fulfill the reparations."

Double Alex's dowry price? That's *it*? "What blood price are they asking for?"

Rowland meets Steve's gaze, holds it, even though sweat is streaming down his temples. "Sarah Richardson claims, and the Virginia Supreme Court Judge agrees, that in addition to kidnapping and murder, the NSA abused habeas corpus to get other government actors to assist. Since the kidnapping was not, as its end point, about Sa Alex Richardson himself, but instead was an attempt to abuse a relationship with a loved one, well…."

"Well, what?"

"The blood price she's claiming is three loved ones of the NSA's director in chief."

Steve's mouth drops open—even in his madder, combat-frenzy days he'd never-- "Are you *serious*?"

"Oh yes." Rowland smiles, bitter and sharp. "However, she is willing to concede that double her omega's dowry price would be sufficient."

"Wait—how is that even possible?" Sure, Alex comes from a good family, but— "He doesn't inherent the banks, does he?"

"No—but he is heir to every piece of land the Richardson family owns. Including literal acres of beltway real estate."

"How much is that worth?"

"Millions. Millions that, even though it's black-budget, have to be accounted for. Everyone in the intelligence game will know."

And make fun of the NSA, if Steve know anything about inter-agency politics. "You're being very forthcoming."

"I did tell you I thought the team needed more nuanced handling." Rowland lets his hand drop at last, sighs. "They're very canny, your omegas. Did you know that Sa Richardson's bodyguards aren't part of his, ah, company?"

That can't possibly be right. Those had been hard men—the kind Steve knew in the old days. The kind to stand on street corners, the kind to rule the back rooms of the bars. "I find that hard to believe."

"So did I, but in fact, Sarah Richardson brought copies of payroll records as part of her motion to have the NSA pay full blood price. According to the records, it was not Sa Richardson who hired the bodyguards, but Sa Richardson's mother." Rowland takes a deep breath. "Sarah Richardson said that her mother began looking for candidates the day after Mr and Sa Stark's funeral."

Oh.

Steve shut his eyes. He can see it so clearly—the elder Richardsons would have attended the funeral, and Alex's mother would have taken time to talk to Tony. And Tony—

Wanted Alex safe.

"Yes," Rowland says, sober. Then he smiles, and Steve can smell Rowland's autumn prairie scent rise, dark. "The NSA wanted to claim, *did* claim, that they'd merely killed members of a drug syndicate—and Sarah Richardson proved, definitively, legally, that the NSA murdered the guards a young virgin omega's family had hired to protect him. And that, as I'm sure you know, does not look at all the same. She offered to go to trial, with an open, public court."

With Tony's evidence, with the kind of lawyers the Richardsons can afford, with a Virginia Supreme Court judge willing to come to the capital in the middle of the night--"They're lucky she's willing to accept the dowry price."

"They are." Rowland takes a deep breath. "Captain. The Richardsons will make arrangements for the men who fell protecting Sa Richardson."

Well, of course they will, with generous provisions to any widows and children. Steve just nods. Rowland's working up to saying something, but it's not funeral arrangements.

"I attended some of the legal negotiations. Assistant Director Hill was there, representing Shield, but I was there as a direct witness, should they need one."

"Thank you," Steve says. He still doesn't trust this man, not even a little, but he did perform well this evening.

Rowland shakes his head. "I didn't do it for thanks. I did it because the NSA was way out of line."

And to help Tony, Steve suspects, but doesn't say. He just nods. Rowland has the smell of truth about him, at least about this.

"The thing is, Captain, I feel I should warn you." Rowland shifts his weight to the balls of his feet.

Here it comes—whatever backlash the NSA has planned.

"Sarah Richardson told me she'd sent Dr Green, their family doctor, to see Sa Richardson. Na Stark was concerned, because Sa Richardson seemed worse instead of—"

Steve's out the door before he can hear the rest of the sentence.

*

"Alex will be fine," Natasha says, as soon as Steve gets home.

The blankets are tumbled about, cushions spilled everywhere, but the omegas are still sleeping in one spot, tangled together, a large lump under his own navy comforter. The only part of them left exposed is one of Alex's wrists, wrapped around some part of Honey. The pale, smooth skin has blossomed into bruises.

Steve inhales deeply. He can smell that someone else was here, someone Steve's never met, but there's no scent of deep fear, distress, or blood.

"Alex will be fine." Natasha doesn't even look tired. It's one of her many talents. "Dr Green said the hospital's antidote did its job, but it gave Alex some pretty severe nausea."

Steve crouches close, hovers his hand over the blankets, testing for warmth. It isn't too hot, which is something, and it's not fading to cold, either. Alex and Honey are wrapped around each other, both deeply asleep. "How long until he's better?"

"Tomorrow or the day after," Natasha says. "He drank the electrolyte solution, and he can have more when he wakes up. It's just a question of waiting. Dr Green thinks he'll probably sleep another day or two, then be fine except for being careful with that ankle."

Steve considers that. His old omegas would do that, if they'd been hurt. They could sleep for a day or two, and their bodies would use all of the extra energy into healing. Their wounds would close earlier, better, than anyone else's. "Is he sure?"

"He's sure, Cap." Natasha touches Steve's arm. "I ran a background check on him, a couple years ago. Dr Green has been their family physician for years. He delivered Alex and his sisters, actually."

Steve nods slowly. That's more like his day. "Is he going to stay nearby, just in case?" Tony hadn't held the hospital in much esteem.

"He's on the thirteenth floor, in one of the guest apartments. He'll be here as long as we need him."

"Good." Steve gnaws on his lip. "Did you get a chance to ask Alex about his experience?"

"Yes." Natasha tucks the blankets closer around Honey's foot. "Alex received a tip from one of Senator Reybourne's aids. She's quite pretty, and she serves the coffee for the Appropriations Committee that Reybourne and Fromm are on. She filled in for one of Fromm's aids when they were out sick."

"Alex is investigating Senator Fromm?"

"Yes." Natasha smiles at the pile of blankets, tucks it closer. "He growled at me when I pressed, but he seems to be looking into the incident with you and the Senator. He's been looking at many different leads—the NSA exploited one of his few vulnerabilities to draw him out."

"According to Rowland, Alex's bodyguards aren't employees of his pharmaceutical firm."

“No, they were hired by his mother, years ago.” Natasha’s scent goes icy and cold. “You did take care of things, didn’t you?”

Steve leans forward and gives his Right Hand a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Yes. I took care of the men who did this.”

She allows the touch, ducking her head a tiny fraction when he pulls back.

Steve reads her silence. “What happened wasn’t your fault, you know.”

Her gaze is stony and cold, as if she doesn’t deign to reply.

A coping mechanism, Steve is sure. Bucky would have made a joke, but Natasha uses silence like a weapon. “Alex will be staying with us for a while, but he wasn’t under your purview when this happened.”

“He got himself out of it,” she says, short and sharp, a rebuke on herself Steve knows.

“Ferocity is an admirable quality in an omega,” Steve says, ignoring the rest of her meaning. He can’t talk her out of that feeling, but he can give her more trust. “I’ve decided to court him, formally.”

Natasha looks up, a fine line between her elegant brows. “Does Shield know?”

“They’ve guessed.” Steve remembers how Rowland had reacted to Steve’s retaliation against the NSA. “I’m not going to let Shield be in charge of my relationships, but that isn’t what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?”

“I believe that I’ve removed the primary, immediate threat, but I can’t be sure it doesn’t go deeper.” Steve shrugs irritably. “Tony is a prize any spy agency would want, but I don’t believe in purely reactionary strategy. We need to find out if anyone else, government or otherwise, assisted or participated.”

“Clint says the last bodyguard might pull through. Alex was not able to remember the fight directly. The Zypralex destroyed those memories. If there was someone at the fight besides the NSA, the bodyguard is the best bet to find out.”

“No, it was only NSA agents at the fight.” Steve is certain. He’d made to sure to interrogate his prey before taking them out. “I’m looking for something more subtle. You excel at subtle.”

Natasha lowers her lashes, practically a blush from her. “You would like me to investigate this?”

“Yes, but it’s a secondary priority. Your first is, and will remain, the protection of the pack omegas. Agreed?”

Natasha looks up, meets his eyes. “Agreed, Alpha.”

It’s been decades of ice since anyone’s called him that. Steve leans forward and brushes another soft kiss on her forehead. “Thank you, my Right Hand. Now, let’s make sure things are tidied up before Tony gets home.”

Chapter 79

Chapter Notes

> And now, the Tony chapter! I am so grateful to my readers. It's been a tough year, but I'm coming through it. And you've all helped. Thank you. I shall be posting more soon!

By the time Tony gets into the elevator, he's nearly staggering from exhaustion. He leans against the wall, head tipped back. "I'm getting too old for this shit, Jarvis."

"If you say so, Sir."

It seems to take forever to reach their floor. When the doors slide open, Tony shoves off the wall.

The living room is dim. The only light comes from his stupid robot lamp and one of the soft, recessed dimmers Tony put in for Steve's art evenings.

Even in the gentle gloom Tony can see that the living room has been tidied since he left. It no longer looks like a band of kindergarteners hit a furniture warehouse to play King of the Mountain with sofa cushions and random bedding.

There's still a small fortress, but now it's made of Steve's good maple bookshelves and the spare steel tool case Tony keeps in the kitchen closet.

The couch cushions have all been put back on their couches.

But Honey's favorite ruby red cashmere blanket isn't folded over the couch where she likes to sit. The side table where Tony stores his current electronic repair project isn't next to his good armchair, either.

It's impossible to see inside the fortress, because the entrance—if there is an entrance anymore—is not visible from the elevator.

Right—line of sight.

Tony smiles. Steve's back.

What Tony wants more than anything is to go check on Alex. Tony wants to run his hands all over Alex's body, check his bruises and scrapes, re-bandage his ankle, taste the delicate skin at the join of jaw and throat, right beneath his ear, lay his head on Alex's chest to hear the steady beat of his heart.

Reassure himself that Alex is alive.

Instead, Tony goes to the kitchen.

Steve's leaning against the stove. There's a large glass of clear lavender liquid sitting next to him. It must be time for Alex's next 'meal'.

Tony strolls right up, slides both hands into that perfect golden hair, drags Steve's head down, and kisses the hell out of him.

Steve makes a surprised noise, but then he's kissing back.

It's desperate at first, all tongue and teeth, sharp and fierce. Tony loses himself in it, grateful to let go. Steve's arms have come around him, holding him tight against Steve's chest. Tony lets himself focus on nothing but how good Steve feels against him, how Steve likes to tip his head back and kiss his throat, how intoxicating it feels when Steve's fingers tighten and hold him still.

Steve leaves a trail of little bites all the way down his throat to his collarbone and Tony can hear all the little sex noises he can't stop making. Then Steve's coming back for another kiss, long and deep.

God, it's good.

When Steve finally pulls back, Tony's out of breath. He shuts his eyes and lets Steve hold him close.

"I'm glad you're home," Steve says, voice low and soft.

Tony inhales deep. Steve smells of Pears' soap, clean laundry, sunshine. The sharp bite of Fight is gone, replaced by the familiar light musk of alpha arousal and something else that Tony can't quite discern. He nuzzles under Steve's jaw, trying to figure it out, but before he can, he's overcome by a huge yawn.

Tony can feel Steve brush a kiss against his hair. "Come on," Steve says, sounding fond. "Let's get you undressed."

"What an excellent idea."

"Very funny. Bed now, I mean it." Steve's turning them so Tony's back is against the kitchen cabinets. He's already started on the suit buttons.

Tony bats at his hands. "I was enjoying that makeout session, thank you very much."

"You'd have fallen down if I wasn't holding you." Steve gently tugs the coat off. Dammit, it's the same way Tony undresses a toddler.

"I would not, you big meanie," Tony says, but he's interrupted by another huge yawn. Jesus, it's fucking stupid to be this tired. "I've stayed up a lot longer, you know."

"I know," Steve says. "But not this time. Come on, Tony, let me take off this shoe."

Feeling sulky, Tony stops trying to yank his foot away. "Oh *fine*."

"Thank you." Steve takes off that shoe, then the other, bracing Tony against the wall with his other hand.

It's completely nuts, but Tony's pretty sure that without Steve's help, he'd slide down the wall and lay in a puddle on the floor. "Maybe if I had some coffee. There's shit we should talk about."

"Nope." Steve neatly rolls the socks. It must be a military thing. Dear old Dad had done the same damn thing.

"I mean it. I want to make sure we've uncovered every angle." Tony braces his hands on Steve's shoulders. "I've got Jarvis looking into the electronic trail, but—"

"Tony." Steve's on his knees, but he looks determined, serious. "If you try to stay awake ten minutes longer, you're going to fall over. I have someone looking into it. We'll make sure Alex is safe."

"It's just—" Tony stops, frowns, looks away. He doesn't want to talk about this. The whole damn time he'd sat with Sarah in that conference room, he couldn't stop hearing Alex's voice, woozy and hopeful, asking if he could be Tony's boyfriend now since Steve likes that kind of thing.

Steve stands up, begins undoing Tony's tie. "Tony," Steve says softly. "I know there are important things to talk about. I know. But right now, Alex needs to sleep, and he won't fall into a deep healing sleep unless you're there."

"Twist the knife a little deeper," Tony mutters. "How did you learn to lay down a guilt trip that good?"

"I'm Catholic." Steve slides the tie off, smooths the wrinkles, drapes it carefully over his own shoulder. "I'm not trying to guilt trip you. I'm trying to explain something."

"Then quit with the guilt and explain."

"I have a lot of personal experience with omegas who've been injured or traumatized. Omegas heal best, heal more quickly, if they feel safe."

Tony crosses his arms over his chest, glares hard at the floor, tries not to think about Na Everly telling Obie that Tony would stay at Miss Price. 'Na Stark will recuperate better here. I know St Teresa's Memorial has better equipment and top notch experts, but it won't feel safe. Na Stark will not be able to rest, and his body will put its energy into preparing to defend himself instead of into healing.'

Steve strokes Tony's cheek with the back of his knuckles. "You and Honey are going to wrap yourselves around Alex just like you did before. Sometimes you'll wake up a little, and we'll give you a drink or something to eat. You'll fall back to sleep right away."

“I have important things to do, you know. I can’t just take days off to *sleep*.” Not even for Alex. There’s the damn surveillance equipment made from Aliana Martin’s alloy. There’s the new satellite upgrade Tony promised Pepper so Stark Industries can offer better data plans for their cell customers and stay solvent. There’s the chemical analysis he’s been running on the weapons used in Bogota. There’s Fromm’s machinations at the Celebration of Heroes. There’s goddamn Ross. And now there’s an entire clandestine service organization trying to kidnap people he cares about.

Not that Tony wants to remind Steve of any of this. The fluctuations in Steve’s system are a whole other problem, one that Tony also needs to solve.

“I do know,” Steve says softly. “I promise I will take care of your other responsibilities. I’ll make sure everything is taken care of.”

“You’re serious.”

“Very.” Steve gently takes Tony’s hands, draws them down by his sides. “I want you to let me do this, Tony. Please.”

Oh, what the hell. Tony has to get some sleep anyhow, might as well be next to Alex. He can always get out of bed when he wakes up, right?

So he shrugs and says, “Fine, but if Pepper’s pissed about the upgrade delay, I’m sending her to you, big guy.”

“That’s fair,” Steve says cheerfully. He’s already got half of Tony’s shirt buttons undone—he’s clearly not taking any chances of Tony changing his mind. There’s a little pile of sleep clothes on the counter and everything. Steve obviously had this planned before Tony even got home.

Finally dressed in sleep clothes, Tony drinks the glass of lavender electrolyte solution because it’s easier than arguing. It tastes a bit like those candied violets Na Freddericks taught them to make to decorate fancy cakes.

When Steve picks him up to carry him to the bed, bridal style, Tony grabs his shoulders in surprise. “Whoah. Even when I got married nobody did this.”

“Your past spouses were idiots,” Steve says. “I’m sure I’ve mentioned this already.”

All Tony can do is shake his head.

*

The bookcases that make up the living room fortress walls are beautiful old maple, heavy and solid. They’re full of folio-sized art books and heavy dictionaries. As Steve steps carefully into the narrow opening between them, Tony realizes that the damn books are so thick they’d probably stop a whole rain of bullets.

Tony’s trying not to yawn again. He doesn’t want to encourage Steve in his weird ideas, but being carried like this is kind of nice.

His eyes are drooping closed when Steve stops and kneels carefully. Tony's all set to snuggle in next to his nice, warm Alex. "Holy shit, is that *Natasha*?"

That lump under the blankets sure as hell isn't Alex, and Honey would never paint her toenails in such a boring French manicure.

"Yes," Steve says. "I told you, we'll keep Alex safe. Now hush, we don't want to wake everyone."

"But it's Natasha. Right there under your comforter. She's wearing my Marvin the Martian pajama pants! I can see the little green helmet!"

"If I explain, will you keep your voice down?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure." Tony can't stop staring. Jesus, it really is her.

"I had a lot of things to do when I got home, but Natasha had been up for hours. She needed rest."

Tony tries to rub the sleep from his eyes. That sounds completely reasonable. Steve would want someone strong and scary to be close to Alex. Natasha could rest, but she'd wake in an instant, deadly as ever. Steve could work on whatever he needed to finish up, secure in the knowledge that Natasha's serving as backup. It makes good strategic sense.

It's a pity that Tony doesn't believe it for a second.

"If you don't want to tell me, I'd rather you just say so." Tony peers blearily at the mess of blankets. Natasha is closest to the fortress's 'doorway', blocking it with her body. A few feet behind her is a larger lump of covers—Alex and Honey.

Steve sighs. "What I said is true."

Tony shrugs stiffly. "From a certain point of view."

"I did need her to keep close to Alex. Strategically, it's better to have her here."

"You actually think Alex's going to sleep deeply with an alpha that close?" Tony's not hurt. He's *not*. Steve's entitled to his secrets.

"No." Steve bites his lip, ghosts a hand over Natasha's form under the covers. "I thought Natasha would sleep more deeply."

Tony watches the slight rise and fall of the comforter, slow, rhythmic. Natasha should be awake, sitting up, looking around, fingering her little cadre of knives and pointy things. "Huh."

"Now that you're here, I'll switch the watch to the far armchair. OK?"

Tony tries to remember if he's ever seen Natasha sleep. He's pretty sure he never has. The Snyder Sleep Protocol brochure covered supportive measures for all three types, further

subdivided by various personality traits and trauma categories, but Tony didn't get a chance to read all of it before Steve nicked it. He'd looked up parts of it online, but the topic made him so twitchy he'd shut the browser window. A mistake, obviously.

"This is a pack thing, isn't it?" Tony asks.

There's a long silence from Steve, and Tony turns so he can see his expression. Oh damn. Steve has that careful, blank look. Tony's hurt his feelings.

"I'm sorry, babe. I'm trying not to be an insensitive dick, but it's an uphill battle."

"Don't talk down about yourself," Steve says automatically.

Tony rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, but seriously, gorgeous. I'm sorry."

"You don't have anything to apologize for. It was a reasonable question."

Right. That's why Steve answered it happily. Tony doesn't say that, though. "Never mind. I'll just get to snuggling Alex."

Steve touches his arm, just a delicate brush of fingers. "Yes."

"What?"

"Yes. It's a pack thing. I need my Right Hand to be in top shape, and she'll get more out of a few hours sleep here than an entire night in a bed." Steve looks wary, like he expects Tony to leap up and begin denouncing Steve's perfidy to the world.

"OK," Tony says, doing his best to sound airy. "I just wondered. Now, tuck me in."

Steve's brows draw together. "That's it?"

"That's it," Tony says firmly. "I agreed to do much weirder stuff, if you recall."

"Yes, but—" Steve stops, gives himself a little shake. "Thank you. I really will keep the watch far away from all of you while you're sleeping. I promise."

Tony leans in and gives Steve a quick kiss on the cheek. "I know, babe. Now tuck me in before I pass out."

He's rewarded by one of Steve's shy, real smiles. "OK, Tony."

*

The first time Tony wakes up, he has no idea how much time has passed.

He's buried under Alex, who is snoring softly into his ear. The only thing Tony can see is a quiff of messy brown hair and a few ceiling tiles. He tries shifting a little. It'd be nice to look around for a second, maybe see what time it is, check on Steve…

There's a deep, low rumble, more vibration than noise.

Tony wraps his free arm around Alex's shoulders, and the growl subsides. Alex yawns a few times, snuggles himself more on top of Tony, makes a satisfied noise, and drops off again.

"Oh fine," Tony says. "Have it your way. I'll just lay here and count ceiling tiles until my whole body goes numb."

He drifts back to sleep before he gets past four.

*

The second time Tony wakes up, he can't feel Alex at all.

Tony's scrambled out of the covers before his eyes are fully open.

"Oh," Tony says, dropping the rumpled blanket.

Alex gives him a bleary look and finishes the pink electrolyte drink Dr Green is holding to his mouth. Alex is wearing a magenta shirt that exclaims *Dancers Do It With Style* in curly white letters. The scoop neck reveals more skin than the band shirt Tony'd given him at the hospital. There a bruise on Alex's collarbone that's as big as Steve's fist. The bruises on Alex's arms have started to turn green and yellow.

Honey's sitting cross legged not far away. She's wearing a pair of Tony's sunglasses and drinking something electric green from a giant smoothie glass. Her hair is mooshed flat on one side and sticking straight up on the other.

Tony scrubs his hands over his face. It's not that he feels *terrible*, exactly. It's more that he feels exhausted—stretched thin, maybe. Kind of see through. He can see why Honey's wearing the shades. If he didn't know better, he'd say he has a rotten hangover.

Dr Green approaches slowly, holding out a violent blue drink that smells like Easter lilies. "Here. You'll feel much better after you drink this."

Tony's pretty sure he'll hurl it back up, but he's too tired to argue. The liquid tastes better than it looks, slightly sweet and fruity, like a melon and green tea paleta.

By the time he's done chugging it back, Alex has begun shoving the blankets around and fussily tossing pillows away. Honey hands her empty glass to Dr Green and flops onto her side.

What a good idea.

Tony flops, too, and then he feels Alex drag some blanket over them. There's a bit of rearranging and scooting around until Honey's using Tony's calf as a pillow, and Tony's using her hip, and they're both curled around Alex.

Vaguely, Tony can hear Dr Green talking to someone, but Tony's asleep before he can catch a single word.

*

The third time Tony wakes up, he doesn't even bother wondering what day it is. That's far too much work.

He's sprawled on his stomach, and someone's using his back as a pillow.

Tony shoves himself up on his elbows, and it's a lot harder than it should be. "Jesus, fuck."

"Here."

This time the glass is perky orange. Tony squints at it, but makes no move to take it. "I thought Tang went out in the 80s."

"Very funny, man. It's some kind of tonic." The glass disappears briefly. "Tastes like guava."

Tony groans and buries his face in the covers where a pillow would usually be. Alex has definitely been at this bed—Alex knows Tony doesn't like sleeping with pillows any more.

"Hey! No sleeping. Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey."

Tony drags some covers over his head. All that light and noise. So fucking loud.

"Come on," the voice says, coaxing. "All you gotta do is drink this and change your shirt, OK? Then you can go back to sleep. You'll feel a lot better after, promise."

Tony doesn't believe it, but he can hear the stubborn note. There's no chance of peace until he gives in. When he pushes himself up on his elbows, his own grumbling is echoed by cranky growling. Of course it's Alex using him as a pillow.

The glass is held right in front of him. Tony's too exhausted to be embarrassed at having someone else hold his glass. He just drinks the damn thing. It does taste a bit like guava.

"Thanks, Clint." Tony's eyes drift shut. "But forget about the shirt."

There's another low, definitive growl from behind him.

"All righty then. Forgetting the shirt ASAP."

*

The fourth time Tony wakes up, he just lays there, feeling confused.

Alex is curled up against his left side. Tony can feel the regular susurrus of his breathing, steady and deep. Honey's snuggled against Alex's back. Her breathing has a slightly higher note, feminine and sweet.

Tony's a clear thinker, unless he's shit faced drunk, and he's used to applying deductive reasoning to everyday situations. Logically, the two people closest to him would be Alex and Honey. That's who it was before, no reason to believe anything's changed, therefore that's who it is now.

Except that Tony knows it's Alex and Honey. He doesn't just think so, he's completely certain of it.

Even though the entire room is pitch dark and devoid of a single speck of light.

"Huh," Tony says.

*

Tony has no idea how long he's been lying there in the dark. It's kind of nice, actually. Whoever's keeping watch over them must be pretty far away or seriously quiet. Tony can't hear them at all.

He should get up, get to work on the seven million problems he'd been trying to solve before some stupid government agency tried to kidnap his best friend and ruin his life *again*, not to mention the eleventy zillion new problems that always frolic into his life when he even thinks about taking a day off.

Hell, he should get up and tell their personal guardian angel that it's OK to take a pee break.

But he doesn't.

Tony wriggles his toes absently. The bed is ridiculously comfortable. It's not from any of his own bedrooms, and it's far too wide to be Natasha's. He'd gotten a latex mattress for Clint's suite, because Phil's physical therapist said it would help his recovery. The guest rooms have kings, but they're regular plush. This is the extra long, double pillow top, custom California king he got Steve.

How the hell did they get it from Steve's rooms to here? That hallway turn would be a right bitch. Tony hopes they didn't knock out too many walls. It's a pain to hire painters with sufficient background checks.

These sheets, now… These sheets cannot be Steve's.

Tony'd chosen those himself. Steve's overactive senses would make cheap cotton feel like burlap, but Steve hated Tony's wealth. The sheets needed to be fine quality—but look like everyday. Since the sheets had to be sewn to fit the custom bed anyway, Tony'd gone with cool, white combed Egyptian cotton in a smooth sateen weave. He'd had the hems and pillowcase edges embroidered with vintage flower patterns common in the thirties. Tony'd found the bright flowers a little jarring, but the guy'd been yanked into a new century. Maybe familiar sheets, no matter how loud, would let him get a decent night's sleep.

Tony must have guessed wrong. Steve must have disliked them. The sheets covering them right now sure as hell don't have cheerful flower borders.

In the inky black of the bookcase fortress, Tony can't see the color but he can feel the fiber is linen. Very smooth, very fine linen. These are Natasha's sheets.

The pillows are long gone, hurled away by Alex in one of his moods.

Moving carefully so he doesn't wake Alex or Honey, Tony shoves aside Steve's comforter so he can touch the other blanket underneath. He feels it with his fingers and frowns. It's very soft, slightly fuzzy. It's not Honey's favorite couch blanket, and it's not the Tigger fleece.

No, it's the gray pashmina throw Phil keeps on the foot of their bed.

Under that is another layer. Smooth, with the not-quite-slick feel of real silk, textured with a heavily patterned weave. It's the antique sari Clint picked up in India because he liked the pattern of llamas and elephants.

Wait—Honey'd been wearing one of Tony's shirts, and Alex was wearing one of Honey's. Is this some creepy attempt to make them all smell like each other? God knows packs do weirder shit.

Feeling more than a little nervous, Tony leans over and sniffs Alex.

Good, old fashioned dirt. Tony's own slightly minty shampoo. A hint of the extra-organic super-gentle magnolia laundry detergent Honey uses.

And faintly, the amber scent of Alex sleeping deeply.

Relieved, Tony lays back down. Jesus, he needs to dial back on the paranoia.

After a while, the sound of their breathing relaxes him. Tony's feeling pretty good, actually. There's no exhaustion dragging at him. His head doesn't feel like it's going to fall off. Hell, he doesn't even feel queasy.

How long has it been since his stomach hasn't been upset? Not since-- Tony can't remember. He's been knocking back Na Anderson's hideous, weedy anti-nausea tea since forever.

Tony reaches over and runs his fingers through Alex's too short hair. Alex makes a pleased little noise in his sleep and snuggles closer. Tony gives in and pets him behind his ears just to hear the happy sound.

"Silly mongoose," he murmurs. "That's what you are. A silly, snuggly little mongoose. Maybe Steve's right. Maybe sleeping together is good for our health. That'd be a big stick in Dad's eye. If omegas turn out to have some use after all."

Alex doesn't wake up to hear Tony make an ass of himself with stupid nicknames, thank God, but Tony figures he'd better knock it off before his luck runs out. "Jarvis, what time is it? Hell, what day is it? How long have I been out?"

"Good morning, Sir. It is 3:27 AM, and today is Thursday, the eleventh. You have been sleeping for six and a half days."

"Holy *shit*." Tony's mind scrambles around, trying to decide what to panic about first.

"Sir, if I may say so, the rest appears to have been efficacious. Other Sir is recovering well ahead of schedule, and you yourself seem to be benefitting significantly. Your blood pressure

has stabilized. You no longer exhibit symptoms of low-grade dehydration. Your resting heartrate is slower. While I have not performed blood tests, you do not appear to be suffering as many night sweats, restless legs, or nightmares."

"Yeah, great, but I was out a week. Pepper is going to filet my liver and feed it to the shareholders herself."

"Actually, Sir, I believe Ms Potts is not displeased with you. In fact, she appeared in excellent spirits when she spoke to Captain Rogers on Tuesday."

Tony frowns up at the pitch black ceiling. "Pepper was here?"

"Not in person. They spoke via video conference." Jarvis pauses, then says, "Sir, you did instruct me to assist Captain Rogers in technological matters. He told me that he'd promised to fulfill your responsibilities, and the recording I have of your conversation does appear to support his statement—"

"Wait a minute. Are you telling me that Steve was talking to Pepper about the data plan upgrades?"

"Yes, Sir. I apologize if I acted contrary to your wishes in this matter, but—"

"No, no, you're fine." Steve actually talked to Pepper about Stark Industries? Steve hates SI, and he's not a big fan of Pepper, either. "How did it go?"

"Quite well. Ms Potts was pleased with the submitted designs, and—"

"Back up. Submitted designs? What submitted designs? Jarvis, what the hell happened while I was out?"

"Captain Rogers told me he'd promised to fulfill your responsibilities during the recovery. I assisted him in locating replacement designers for the improved data plan—that young engineer at Stanford you had your eye on."

"The one who hacked MIT?"

"The very same. She had a number of promising ideas, and we collaborated on outlining three plans for Ms Potts to review. The next responsibility was, of course, the chemical analyses of the weapons used in the Bogota attack. Captain Rogers suggested we ask Na Anderson. She agreed, and I arranged for the transport of the samples through one of other Sir's trusted couriers."

Wonderful. Jarvis sent one of Alex's omega drug mules to deliver a package of used explosives to a school for children. Tony drags some of the blankets over his head.

"Captain Rogers felt that security for Terrence Delano should be increased, at least in the interim, so he personally selected several individuals and dispatched them to Seattle."

Tony wonders vaguely whether Jarvis would believe him if he pretended to fall back asleep. Probably not. Jarvis is sneaky about checking his pulse rate.

“Naturally, Captain Rogers was also concerned about other Sir’s businesses, but I assured him that Marie and Tom would have things well in hand. I’m afraid neither of us could think of an appropriate person to replace you at the Clean Energy Conference in Des Moines, the Vector Award ceremony in Denver, or Na Amelia Calhoun Sykes’s coming out ball in Queens. After considerable contemplation, Captain Rogers penned personal regrets to each party.”

Tony tugs at the heavy pile of blankets, trying to drag a few more over his head.

“I did not share your alloy investigation with Captain Rogers; however, I can report that Na Anderson has made progress with the photographs we were able to take on the Helicarrier the other evening. She will update you on Saturday. While you have not said so directly, I’m certain you’re also concerned that the brief investigation into the National Security Administration was not nearly thorough enough to be conclusive.”

“No shit.” Tony hacked their emails, but he’d only had time to run a few searches.

“You’ll be pleased to know that Captain Rogers delegated that investigation to the capable Agent Romanoff.”

“What—really?” But Alex isn’t even a member of Shield.

“Indeed. As for your Shield responsibilities, villainous incursions on US soil were as average for this time last year. Captain Rogers dispatched Agent Coulson to deal with an issue in northern California, then Agent Barton to Indiana. Once both returned, Agent Romanoff was sent to assist in a minor matter in Oklahoma. She returned yesterday afternoon. By the way, Sir—“

“Yes?” Tony asks warily.

“Agent Barton requests that you get to work on some way for other team members to fly. He suggested anti-gravity boots, but I’m not sure if he was joking.”

Tony lays his arm over his eyes. “Tell him I’ll see what I can do.”

“Very good, Sir.”

“Steve really did take care of practically everything while I was out.” It’s a bit disconcerting, and Tony doesn’t know what to make of it.

“He did, yes. If I may say so, Sir, everyone was quite concerned. You are held in both esteem and affection.”

“I’m good at blowing shit up, anyway.” And just plain blowing people. “I guess that’s a handy talent.”

Jarvis doesn’t argue, which is a relief.

So. Alex is here, safe. Stark Industries is chugging along on its peacenik path to fiscal glory. The fate of the world is being handled in turns, like a slightly mad potluck rota. Even Tony’s

super-secret investigations are on track.

“When Alex wakes up, things—what? Go back to normal?” It’s hard to picture, but all the extra sleep has probably warped his mind.

“You’re cleared to return to light duties as tolerated, and Dr Green anticipates you will both be returned to full activity the day after tomorrow.”

Tony parses that, frowns. Wait a minute—Jarvis usually just says yes. “What aren’t you telling me, Jarvis? What are you holding back?”

“Captain Rogers took the liberty of clearing your calendar of minor administrative duties for the next two days. You should be able to enjoy a few—“

“Jarvis.”

There’s a little pause, then Jarvis says, “You have a therapy appointment with Dr Brown, tomorrow afternoon at 1 PM until 3:30 PM.”

Therapy?

For two and a half *hours*?

That’s it—Tony’s through with this being awake shit.

He yanks the covers back over them and scoots down. That half-wakes Alex, who’s delighted to snuggle around and rearrange their sleeping positions. Tony winds up with his head on Honey’s shoulder, her arms around his waist, and Alex wrapped around his back. Alex nuzzles the back of Tony’s neck like he’s grooming him, for all the world as feral as the omegas in that National Geographic special.

Well, whatever.

For once, Tony’s too comfortable to care.

Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the long delay. Again. Ended up quite sick, in hospital, etc. They're pretty sure I'm mended now, but it took a while.
>
> Given Fate's happy habit of tossing really Dire things my way whenever I say I shall post more soon, I won't say it. I will just think it. Very loudly.
>
> ETA: For some reason, A03 is deleting my one word lines. I have re-inserted two of them. Each time I tried pasting them back in, they didn't show. I had to type them. I am going to carefully reread and re-add if necessary. *frets and wrings hands* As I'm sure some of you have guessed, I'm a bit of a textual control freak. *dives back to double-check some more*

When Alex wakes up, Tony is gone.

After the sleet and snow, the sun is out.

It’s going to be a beautiful day.

Alex sits up, feels Honey stir next to him. The bruises that blossomed over his wrists have faded.

He runs his hands through his hair, holding his bangs back, braces his elbows on his knees, folds forward, eyes shut tight.

In a minute, in just a moment, someone’s going to come into this strange little nook.

They’ll ask how he’s doing.

They’ll talk in quiet voices about George, who loved to swing Emily up on his shoulders when she was little, about Kenny, who always said, ‘Those things’ll kill you, boss,’ whenever Alex pulled out a smoke, about Nate, who’d been retiring in three years—as soon as his baby girl finished college.

Alex will answer, will say all the right words, will tell everyone he’s doing well. It was a difficult experience, of course, but—

But in a minute, in a moment.

Not yet.

So, Alex inhales the quiet, the last breath of grace he's going to get today, presses his forehead against his knees.

Keeps his eyes shut.

Holds all the words behind his teeth.

*

The next day goes as Alex knew it would.

Funeral arrangements, security upgrades, pipeline contracts, research reports, and the annual IRS audit notice.

His secretary has already ordered the black-bordered thank you notes, but Alex makes the phone calls personally.

He has three hundred and twenty seven unread emails, sixty three voice mail messages, six couriered packages, and two hand-delivered notes.

None of them are from Tony.

*

Tony doesn't appear the next morning either.

Today is his first counselling session with Dr Brown, and Alex gets to have it all by his lonesome.

Afterward, Alex slips into the back hallway that leads to the service elevator. There aren't any cameras here.

He slumps against the wall, tips his head back, eyes shut tight.

There's no one here to pretend for, there's no one he has to impress, no one to fool.

Well.

Just himself.

*

Through cunning deception, skilled guile, and a couple of outright bald-faced lies, Alex manages to avoid being alone with his sister Sarah when he's home for the funerals.

She's a Richardson, too, so he's certain she knows exactly what he's doing when he talks pleasantly to Bunny Cartwright and Mindy Stevens.

Her gaze follows him around the room, as he speaks softly to Kenny's mother, as he clasps George's wife's hands in his, as he gives Nate's baby girl the hug Nate will give her if--*when* he's well again.

It takes a long, long time to do the rounds, and Alex feels his sister's dark watchful eyes on him the whole time.

At last, Alex is able to slip into the back summer kitchen. He needs a drink or he's going to start losing his voice. The middle cupboard, up top and to the back, that's where---his fingers grope, trying to find the slim smooth bottle.

"Looking for this?"

Alex winces--*busted*.

Worse, Sarah sent in the cavalry. Alex has zero defenses against their baby sister, Emily, and Sarah damn well knows it.

He forces a wry smile on his face and turns around. "If you mean mama's bottle of whiskey, then yes."

Uh oh.

His smile must have failed completely, because Em is already pouring a double into a jelly jar. She's not looking at him—a bad sign.

"Sarah sent you." Alex doesn't want to play a round of pretend. He's far too tired.

"Nope." Emily slides the jelly jar across the table to him. Instead of replacing the cork, she takes a long swig, straight from the bottle. "I'm trying to figure out if you're OK. Or, maybe, how not OK."

Alex has to look away. Tony's the one who taught Em that, one sleepy Virginia summer night, up on the roof. "I'm fine."

Alex had been working hard that August, wading through the endless paperwork of Price Manufacturing's first major IRS audit. Tony'd dragged Em out onto the roof while Alex was stuck at the desk by the window, reading intricate forms and obscure, intentionally confusing instructions.

Alex didn't really mind--it felt so much like he'd been grounded again, stuck inside on a perfect mellow night, taking the fall for another of Tony's mad schemes.

'Now, I knew your mama a little,' Tony'd said to Em, legs dangling off the sloped roof, arm slung around her waist.

'I thought you were always stuck in school?' Emily had said.

'Mostly was,' Tony says, head tipped back so the mess of curly hair spills over his neck and shoulders. Alex loves it like that, so wild and joyful. Surprisingly soft to the touch.

Em just waits. It's one of her secret superpowers—like Mom, Emily has the gift of silence open. An openness that welcomes, that says, *Tell me. It'll be all right. Or I'll make it right*.

‘Mostly was,’ Tony says again, the words spoken slowly, savoring them. ‘Sometimes—sometimes they sent me out in the world to glad hand around.’

‘Fancy parties,’ Em says, darkly.

That makes Tony laugh for real. ‘Yeah.’

‘So,’ Em says, and Alex can’t see everything from this angle, but Tony raises up his hands in self-defense, laughing more and more as Em pokes him.

‘OK! OK! I’ll spill!’

‘So spill,’ Em says.

Tony steals the whiskey bottle, tips it back for a long drink. His golden skin is lovely in the shadowy shade of Virginia night, with just the moon and some of the farm lights shining on him.

When Tony’s done, he corks the bottle but doesn’t give it back yet. His hands dangle between his knees and he looks out at the old oaks, the rough forest that’s crept back. He runs his tongue over his teeth, then looks once at Emily. She’s looking right back, bold as Mom would have been.

It always makes Alex’s stomach hurt, and he looks back at his desk again. At the paperwork and forms, the pens and stapler, the crystal glass of his own, peachy colored bourbon.

Alex takes a long drink while Tony goes on.

The taste is rough, sharp.

‘I was sent out to the parties mostly as a cattle parade. You know, look before you buy.’ Tony’s words are matter of fact, his voice calm. ‘Sometimes, I was sent so at least there’d be some Stark there.’

Em makes an encouraging noise.

‘That was a lot less often, though.’ Tony laughs a little at some joke none of them will get. ‘I went to Chrystal Delaney’s shindig. Lot of people in the market.’

Em is wise enough to not say, ‘in the market for what?’

‘There was this Navy officer—anyway, I’m doing my best to stick to the purely public spaces when your mom appears like a genie out of a bottle. If genies wear couture gowns and tasteful diamonds. She pulled me into some far back office, dug behind some books on the wall, and produced a bottle.’

Alex can’t see it, but he knows Em is smiling.

‘So,’ she says to me, very seriously, ‘I’m going to be your buddy. Just like girl scouts do when—nevermind. I’ll be your buddy, and you’ll tell me if you’re going someplace else and

for how long, so I know if I have to come find you. And the reverse, too, of course.'

Tony shifts a bit, offers Em the bottle. 'Just place the edge of the bottle on your bottom lip. Yeah, like that. Don't try it yet. Wait til I say. When you tip the bottle up, just let the whiskey slide down your throat. Don't try to breathe until you're done swallowing, OK? The taste will slide over your tongue, then leave a trail of fire down your throat. Ready?'

There was a tiny rustle of Em taking a drink, a surprised noise, a short cough, then his sister's light but throaty laughter.

Alex smiles as he goes back to the paperwork.

A comfortable silence settles down upon them all, just the rustle of oaks and the occasional gasp at the warm rush of bourbon.

His pencil moves steadily over the current form, filling in the truth. There's a lot of forms, and Alex will have his accountant team look these over before he copies them down in ink. It's soothing, putting down the depreciation percents on the Iowa machinery and estimating the material loss in the Michigan plant.

'Tony,' Em says, her voice a little bit breathless from the burn.

Alex raises his head sharply.

'Tony, you said you knew mama a little. Did you see her at any other party?'

There's a soft sigh from Tony, and he runs his hand through his hair—then over his face. 'Yeah. She'd introduce me 'round. Keep an eye on me. She saved me from Herb Bradshaw—dirty old lech.'

There's another long silence.

Alex looks at the pencil in his hand, looks at the shadows made by the moon and the little desk lamp and the big farm light, buzzing with June bugs in July.

'I liked her, your mom.'

Through the window, Alex watches Em stare down at the ground, stories below them.

'She wouldn't let me have any of that whiskey. I told her my dad didn't care. Why should she?' Tony takes a long drink. 'But she stood firm.'

Alex puts the pencil down, lays his hands flat on the desk.

'Not everyone thinks Howard Stark's judgement is God's gift to humanity. Now come here and let me straighten that jacket.' Tony laughs a little, then goes quiet. After a long moment, he says, 'She was a real lady.'

Alex takes his glass of bourbon, knocks it back. It's Franklin County style, the flavor rough. But the burn is mercifully quick.

*

It takes Alex a full two days to extricate himself from the loving clutches of his family.

When he comes in the door to the living room at Stark House, he’s exhausted to the very bone. He sets down his briefcase and takes off his overcoat. There is no one in sight, but the living room is a living room once more.

Alex is very nearly convinced he can go have his soothing lie down when Jarvis clears his throat.

Oh, fucking hell.

What now?

“Sir, please excuse the interruption, but I feel I must inform you of a change to your schedule.”

Alex musters the last of his strength and does not fall face first into the loving arms of the nearest couch.

“It’s just that—“ Jarvis pauses.

Always a bad sign.

“It’s just what?” Alex asks wearily.

“It’s just that you have an appointment. In twenty minutes. With other Sir—and Dr. Brown. The therapist.”

Alex shuts his eyes. “Of course I do.”

*

This is just not how Alex expected their shared counselling session to go.

He'd prepared himself for a knockdown dragout fight over being tested. He'd expected to hear information on how to best prepare himself for knotted intercourse. Hell, he'd figured there would likely be a discussion of how to learn to submit gracefully.

What he had not expected was this.

"You'd like to know if I'm comfortable with Tony displaying possessive feelings for me," Alex says, because he's certain he hasn't heard correctly.

"Yes, that's right," Dr Brown says, and when he smiles the man does indeed look like a Muppet. Alex kind of expects Gonzo to pop up behind him, talking about chickens. "Na Stark is working on his communication skills, and we thought this might be a good first emotion to try to express more clearly."

Alex looks over at Tony, who is slouched in his chair, legs spread as-if-casually to show off his crotch, the hem of his tee shirt riding up just enough to hint at lovely olive skin, his eyes half-lidded and his mouth in a sultry near-pout.

When Tony looks that slutty, Alex usually starts looking around for Fromm or another villain, because it generally means that Tony's scared shitless. Or pissed as hell.

"You don't have to," Tony says, and sure enough, that is his brat's very best bedroom sex-kitten purr. "Who'd want to belong to--"

"I'd like that very much," Alex says, turning back to Dr Brown and speaking loud enough to drown out Tony's drawl.

"Before we proceed, I'd like to remind you, Na Richardson, that your sexual health and well-being are every bit as important as anyone else's. That said, one of the possible ways to show these feelings is through touch, both public displays of affection or through sexual touch. How would you feel about exploring the possibility of touch assignments?"

"I would be open to that," Alex says. He can feel Tony's stare like a burn all along the side of his body.

"What about other means?" Dr Brown asks.

"I'm not sure what other means you had in mind," Alex says, but he is curious.

"Collars?" Tony asks softly.

Alex can't help it. He reaches over and brushes the back of his knuckles over Tony's cheek. The goatee is always softer than it looks.

Tony turns into the touch, nuzzles Alex's hand, looks up at him through those long dark lashes. So intense. So sweet.

"Yes," Alex says, just as softly, speaking to him as if there's no one else in the room. As if there's no one else in the world.

Tony's lashes dip down, hiding his eyes. "Really?"

"Yes," Alex says.

"Na Richardson, I wonder if we could do an emotional check-in now." Dr Brown's voice is gentle, thoughtful. "Can you give me a word or a phrase that describes how you're feeling right now?"

"Delighted," Alex says. He has to clear his throat, because the first time came out husky, rough. "Delighted. I feel delighted."

"Na Stark? Would you like to do your check-in now?"

Tony ducks back, away, shakes his head. His long bangs fall in his eyes, hiding his expression.

"All right," the doctor says. "Na Richardson, I'd like you tell us an emotion that you feel strongly, but that you have trouble expressing with your partner."

Alex wonders if he should lie. It would be so much easier for everyone. But--Tony has told the truth. Alex will, too.

"I'm not sure," Alex says.

Dr Brown nods. "Do you feel comfortable expressing affection towards Tony?"

"That's--" Alex stops, looks down, heart suddenly pounding. "It's complicated."

"All right. Tell me about that."

Alex wants to look at Tony, check and see if it's OK to even mention this, but that would be a tell to a doctor as smart as this one. "Tony prefers that we only express certain things....privately."

"Which certain things?"

All of them?

"We're not dating," Alex blurts out, and is suddenly, embarrassingly, ashamed of himself.

Next to him, Tony groans audibly. "I told you, I'm your boyfriend, you moron."

"Well, excuse me for mentioning that you won't even let us go to the deli together," Alex hisses at him, exasperated. "Not even to the one that has your favorite potato salad, made from scratch. Tony, you escaped out the side of the limo when we were stuck in traffic and I was on the phone to my supplier. You could have just said you'd rather not!"

"Oh, yeah, and how many times do I have to tell you that I was late for an appointment? Pepper texted me and--"

"You were not late for an appointment! How many times do *I* have to tell *you* that I started checking with Jarvis to make sure I wasn't fucking up your schedule?"

"Jarvis doesn't know my schedule. You can't hold that against me," Tony says, and his arms are over his chest now.

"Oh my God, Tony, of course Jarvis knows your schedule. He's the only person in the entire world who knows your schedule!"

"Happy knows it," Tony says stubbornly.

"Gentlemen," Dr Brown says. "Let's just pause here, and--"

"Oh come on," Alex says, throwing his hands up. "You can't seriously expect me to believe this. You didn't just ditch me for potato salad at Rico's, you've ditched me for ice cream, you've ditched me for movies, you've ditched me for buying goddamn takeout at the China fucking Dragon."

"That's because the China Dragon puts too much cream cheese in their crab rangoon," Tony mutters.

"Are you even listening to yourself?" Alex says, and oh fuck, is he shouting? Fine.

"Gentlemen!"

"Yeah, because every single problem we ever have is my fault, isn't it," Tony shouts back. "At least I'm not the one who got *married*. If I'm so fucking awful, why aren't you with him?"

"Because I love you more," Alex shouts. "There. Are you happy now? I fucking love you more. And no matter how many people you fuck, no matter how many times you screw up my life, no matter what sick twisted shit you ask me to do, I am always going to fucking love you best. So fucking get over it!"

Alex is breathing hard, and his fists are clenched, and Tony is just staring at him, wide-eyed. Dr Brown is leaning back in his chair, and from the way his hand is resting under his desk, Alex suspects he just hit a panic button.

Alex puts his head in his hands. "I love you. I've always loved you, Tony. I'm terrible at it, I get that. I'm not someone you want to be seen with in public. I get that, too. But I do love you."

Dr Brown clears his throat, and Tony jumps, like he's forgotten the doctor was even there.

"Na Richardson, thank you for sharing your feelings. I'm sure that was very difficult. Is there anything else you'd like to say, right now?"

Alex scrubs his hands through his hair, covers his face with his fingers again, sighs. Fine. "I married Terrence because I was terrified. You kept getting worse. More drinking. More fucking around. More blackouts."

"So, you wanted a backup plan," Tony says, voice flat.

Alex shakes his head, feeling absolutely exhausted. "I told you. I wanted to give us something more stable. Something we could both rely on. The only time you seemed more OK was back home, but you wouldn't stay there, and you wouldn't let me stay with you, but I thought, at least, if you had more people who cared about you in your life, we'd both be better off."

"I can't fucking believe you got married because you thought I was depressed," Tony mutters.

"Tony, you passed out in my sister's parlor. Boom, hit the floor, knocked over that China dog."

"What are you talking about?" Tony says. "When was this? I don't remember this."

"I'm not the least bit surprised," Alex says. "Dr Green said you were suffering dehydration, exhaustion, and nervous strain. Sarah told Obie that he was working you too hard, but he said it was partying. Fell in with a bad crowd."

"And she believed him."

"No," Alex says. Tony may be terrified of Sarah, but Alex's whole family likes Tony. They don't always approve of his antics, but they've always liked him. Obie, on the other hand, has long been viewed with suspicion and disdain.

"Come on, babe, you know your sister. She probably--wait. Was this around the time I was building the satellite upgrade and the prelim repulsor tech?"

"Yes," Alex says. "Sarah offered to have you stay with us for a while. The farm's secure, and the back barn has that shop. She told Obie we'd keep you fed, make sure you slept, got your work done, but that it would be a good way to get you away from those bad influences."

"I can't believe your family doctor diagnosed me with nervous strain. The South's still stuck in some kind of Victoriana nightmare."

"More like Dr Green still has the sense God gave a goat," Alex says. "You should have seen yourself, sweetheart. Dr Green finished the IVs, and we tucked you into my bed, and when you woke up, you scrambled out of the covers and fell on the floor, muttering about your deadlines."

"I don't remember this *at all*," Tony says. He looks more bemused than worried, though, which is something.

"I did say you were having increased blackouts," Alex points out. "That scar, on your left hand. Do you remember it?"

"Come on, Alex, you can't expect me to remember every scar on my hands."

"You got eleven stitches," Alex says, through clenched teeth. "I think most people remember occasions when they get eleven fucking stitches."

Tony peers at his hand. "I got that from a nail that was sticking out of a board when I was--"

Alex leans over, turns Tony's hand over, and traces the white line of scarring. "This one. This one."

"Oh." Tony peers at it. "Pretty sure that's from Afghanistan."

"God give me strength," Alex mutters. "No, it isn't. Look. Give me your fucking phone."

"Who says I have my phone on me?" Tony says, but he looks shifty, and when Alex holds out his hand, imperious, Tony grumbles, shoots Dr Brown a guilty look, and slaps his phone in Alex's hand.

"Jarvis, call her," Alex says.

"Certainly, Sir," Jarvis says.

Dr Brown blinks at the new voice.

Alex smiles tightly and says, "It's like Siri, but for Stark tech." God, Jarvis is going to kill him. Jarvis hates being compared to Siri. Ah well, desperate times.

"Hello," she says, sounding happy. "I was going to call you. I got the results back on that alloy you sent and--"

Alex clears his throat. "Na Anderson, I'm so sorry to interrupt but--"

"Is he OK? Where is he?" Her voice has shifted to a fierce bark of command.

"I'm fine," Tony calls loudly, and then he hisses, "Now see what you've done," to Alex, and then, being Tony, tries to grab the phone back.

Alex, who is experienced with the tricksy ways of the Stark, holds the phone to his ear and skips out of Tony's reach.

"He's fine, but we're in counselling right now," Alex says, leaping over the coffeetable to get away from Tony's frantic grabs while Dr Brown tries to calm both of them down. "I wondered if I could ask you a question. Maybe help us pinpoint something about his blackouts, which--ow, hey!"

Tony has him by the ankle, both arms wrapped tight, glaring up. Alex hops in place, trying not to kill them both by falling over and squashing Tony. "Will you quit that?" Alex hisses.

"Gentlemen, while I appreciate--" Dr Brown says, peering over his desk at Tony, sitting on the floor, holding on for dear life as he's being dragged along by Alex's leg. "Na Stark, are you all right?"

"Give it back!" Tony says. "Jarrrrrrvis!"

"Uh, yes," Na Anderson says. "I'd be happy to help pinpoint something with the blackouts."

"Thank you so much," Alex says, grabbing the armchair with his free hand when Tony tugs on his leg again. Dammit, Tony's braced both feet against Brown's desk and is hauling with all his might. Alex veers dangerously off-balance. "Do you remember the time he got those stitches on his left hand?"

"Yep," she says. "Want me to look up the date? I had to get a substitute in for my class, because he passed out in my workroom, still holding a welding torch. He managed to slice his hand open on some exposed unfinished metal and nearly lit himself on fire." There's a pause, and she muses, "He did set the second best bench on fire, actually. That triggered the overhead sprinkler system, which triggered the chemical lockdown, which alerted me, which--"

Tony is making noises of outrage. "I never-- I wouldn't-- That wasn't me!"

"I might have some security system footage," she says. "He was experimenting with motion detector sensor arrays, and I probably have the data somewhere."

"If it's not any trouble," Alex says, keeping his leg relaxed for another long second before nimbly hopping out of reach while Tony is distracted by trying to proclaim his innocence again.

"Let me just see what I can find. I'll send it to Jarvis, right?"

"That would be lovely, thank you," Alex says, scurrying under a desk while Dr Brown makes more noises of futile protest.

Tony looks like his muscles are tensed for a leap.

"Always nice to talk to you," Alex says, and tosses the phone towards Tony, who catches it out of mid-air with a glare and a grumble.

"She says she might have security footage of you falling over in exhaustion and lighting the workshop on fire," Alex says helpfully.

"Oh fuck you," Tony says, but without heat. He pokes at his phone, stuffs it back in his pocket.

"Well," Dr Brown says, looking at both of his patients, one of whom is sitting on the floor and the other of whom is hiding under the side table. "Well. That was a very, a very revealing, I think, display of relationship dynamics."

"Mutual total inability to relate to other humans in a normal way, you mean," Tony mutters.

Alex grins at him, and he gets a smile in return. Tony crawls over, holds out his hand, helps drag Alex out from under the table.

"Did I really smash your grandparents' fu-dog?" Tony asks. "I thought that fucker was expensive."

"It was my great-great grandparents' fu dog," Alex says. "And yes."

"Good," Tony says. "I always hated that thing. It had googly eyes that followed people around the room."

"Tony," Alex says gently.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Tony says. He flops down on his chair, sprawled out again, but he looks tired. "Blackouts. Drinking. Blah blah blah. Bad Tony. I still don't think getting married was the best option, babe."

"I was running out of ideas," Alex says. It's the pure fucking truth, and the unguarded flash of pain in Tony's eyes makes Alex think that Tony knows it. "You were slipping away from me."

"Yeah, well," Tony says, shrugging. He picks at his cuticle, gnaws on the patch of skin until there's a bead of blood.

But when Alex starts to slip past him to go to his own chair (tipped over in the brief scuffle, whoops), Tony grabs Alex around the waist and tugs him into Tony's chair. It's a perfectly nice overstuffed office-style armchair, so it's not exactly built for two.

They make do, though, wriggling around until Alex is on the bottom and Tony's sprawled on Alex's lap, Alex's chin on Tony's shoulder, with Alex holding Tony close around the waist.

Tony kicks his legs over the side of the chair and sighs. "So."

"So," Alex agrees, noses Tony's collar, sighs, too. They've probably scarred their therapist for life. He hopes they won't get fired as patients.

Together, they both cautiously look up.

Dr Brown is reading a file. "Na Stark, according to your answers, and Captain Rogers' answers, your blackouts are a very rare occurance, triggered by sexual situations only. Is this not correct?"

Tony winces.

Alex noses against the side of Tony's jaw, nips him a little, affectionate, gentle.

"Um," Tony says. "I can explain."

Dr Brown looks up, considers them both. "So, you do have them in non-sexual situations?"

"Wellllllll," Tony says, hedging.

And Alex just knows Tony is going to make a crack about how everything comes back to sex, so technically, he wasn't lying. "Sweetheart, let's just lay it on the line. Please?"

"Na Stark?" Dr Brown asks. "It's quite important that I understand the severity and occurrance rate of your dissociative amnesia."

"I don't see why," Tony says. "Look. I handle it, and there's nothing we can do about it, so can we just skip talking about how much I'm a freak and get back to chatting about how Alex and I can fuck?"

"Na Stark, I'm sorry this discussion is making you uncomfortable. I wish I had been better able to mediate your talk with Na Richardson."

"What?" Tony asks. "Oh. Yeah, well, whatever."

"I heard a lot of strong emotion from you about Na Richardson's marriage, but it seems that your response to his explanation was derailed. Would you like to share your feelings now?"

"It's just--" Tony makes a horrible face and then snuggles back against Alex at the same time. "Getting married because I'm depressed is fucking stupid."

"Can you expand on that, Na Stark? Try to use "I" statements."

"Can't we just skip it?" Tony asks, and it comes out nearly a whine. "Why do we have to keep talking about it?"

"You brought it up," Alex points out, feeling grumpy.

“Na Richardson, I’d like you to hold your comments for just a moment. Let’s hear Na Stark out.” Dr Brown waits a beat, then goes on, “Na Stark, do you feel you can share what you’re feeling right now?”

“I’m feeling like I hate therapy speak,” Tony mutters. “It makes you sound like an idiot.”

Dr Brown doesn’t react—he still looks calm and thoughtful, like he expects Tony’s words to be very important and meaningful.

“Oh for fuck’s sake. Fine.” Tony crosses his arms over his chest, hiding the reactor. Alex can feel the tension singing through his body. “It’s just—“

The silence stretches on, growing more and more painful.

“I don’t like it,” Tony says at last. “I don’t like that Alex got married.”

Alex keeps his mouth tightly shut.

“That’s very good, Na Stark,” Dr Brown says softly. “Thank you for sharing that with us.”

Tony shrugs, looks down at the floor, head turned to the side.

“Is there anything else you’d like to tell us?” the doctor asks. Alex has to hand it to him—for an alpha, Brown can keep his body language very gentle.

Tony shakes his head, still not looking up.

“All right,” Dr Brown says. “I don’t want us to spend all of our time on the past, but I think that was a very important topic to address. You did very well, Na Stark.”

Alex can feel a little bit of the tension fade from Tony.

“So,” Dr Brown says, “I’d like to circle back to our original topic. Na Stark, we’ve talked before about your wish to express your feelings a bit more. Are you still comfortable focusing on the possessive feelings? It’s OK if you’d like to choose a different feeling.”

“That one’s still OK.” Tony shifts a little in Alex’s lap.

Alex absently tucks him closer, the way he’s always done, but Tony pulls away, sits up straighter.

“Excellent. Now, Na Richardson, I’d like you to take a moment to think about your partner, Na Stark, and imagine some ways he might express possessive feelings about you. Just let your mind wander. It can help if you close your eyes. There’s no pressure here, no judgement, just let your imagination roam a little, see what feels good.”

Alex feels more nervous than good, but he shuts his eyes. At first, he can’t think of anything. His mind keeps jumping around, nervous, but—over breakfast, Natasha told him they’d be safe. It was OK to go to stores, government buildings, courthouses, museums, restaurants. Private homes could be trickier, but…

“All right. Na Richardson, have you thought of something that you would enjoy?”

Alex opens his eyes, blinking against the light a little. “Yes.”

“That’s wonderful. Do you feel comfortable sharing it with us?”

Alex isn’t sure, exactly, how well this will go over, but he promised Tony he’d try to tell the truth. Taking a deep breath, Alex says shyly, “I’d like to have supper together at Ivy. It’s Tony’s favorite restaurant, and he has a table there. I’d like—it would be nice to do that. Eat supper there, together.”

Dr Brown smiles a little, and Alex relaxes a bit. He didn’t choose something too weird.

“Thank you for telling us. Now, the second part of this exercise is for Na Stark to consider whether this is something he’d like to try doing. Maybe it’s too big a step, maybe not, but it’s a place to start a discussion.”

Alex checks to see how Tony’s taking this and--Tony looks like he’d rather be stuck in a board meeting.

“Na Stark?” Dr Brown says.

“Yeah, that’s—“ Tony shrugs, but it’s loose, easy. “That’s not gonna happen. Sorry.”

He doesn’t sound sorry. He sounds casual, indifferent, matter of fact.

Alex keeps his expression perfectly pleasant through force of will.

Dr Brown nods thoughtfully, as though it’s perfectly normal to refuse to have dinner with someone you supposedly care about, and says, “I see. Can you think about Na Richardon’s idea and use it as a springboard for another idea? One that feels good to you?”

“Not from that idea,” Tony says, stretching a little.

“Na Stark, it’s OK if your idea is different. The purpose of the exercise is to exchange possibilities until you find one that would feel good to you both, that matches the comfort level of where you’re at right now.”

Alex’s stomach hurts, but Brown’s an excellent therapist. One of the best, according to his clinic director in Albany. The exercise is fine, it’s just that Alex shouldn’t have suggested

something as bold as eating together in public—he should have picked something much smaller. Whatever that might be.

The silence stretches on.

And on.

And on.

Tony's not going to offer an idea.

"All right," Dr Brown says, while Alex stares hard at the bland watercolor on the wall. "Na Stark, I'd like to check in. Have your feelings about doing this exercise changed?"

"No," Tony says, but he drawls it slowly.

Alex wishes Tony had let him go to his own damn chair. This is fucking painful and some distance would help.

"Let's try a different approach. Na Richardson, I sensed a lot of surprise from you when we initially began discussing Na Stark's possessive feelings. It seems that going to dinner together is too big a step. What I'd like to do now is find a much smaller step."

Like what, Alex wonders, dining on the same continent?

In the same country?

My goodness—even the same state? Perish the thought.

Alex keeps his mouth firmly shut. He promised Tony that he'd fully participate in the counseling. No matter what.

"Na Stark, during our private session, we discussed some ideas for expressing these feelings. At the time, I asked if it would be OK to share some of these ideas with your partner. I'd like to check in again and see if it remains OK for me to share them with Na Richardson. If you've changed your mind, we'll just do a different exercise."

To Alex's surprise, an expression, the barest change—an almost invisible flicker of emotion passes over Tony's face. If Alex hadn't known Tony so well, if he hadn't been paying such close attention, Alex would have missed it.

Determination.

And Fear.

"I want to introduce him, as my boyfriend."

Alex can barely breathe, the pounding of his heart is so loud. The word echoes, around and around the small office.

Boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

Dr Brown is speaking and Alex forces himself to listen.

“Alex—I'd like to know if you’re comfortable with Tony displaying possessive feelings for you," Dr Brown says, “By introducing you as his boyfriend. Is that within your comfort level?”

“Yes,” Alex says. “Yes.”

Chapter 81

Chapter Notes

> I Aten't Dead, but things got Quite Exciting for a while there. Transitional chapters between major acts are difficult, yo, but I swear I'm going somewhere with all this, no really.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve hates himself, just a little, for not being offended.

"It isn't a question of money," the gentleman hurries on—Mr Benson. That's right, his name is Mr Benson, and Steve's met him before, at another one of these shindigs. In autumn, not long before Thanksgiving. His eyes had sparkled as bright as the champagne on offer, his laugh bright and clear, his wife's arm tucked in his, both of them glowing.

"Of course," Steve murmurs, keeping his voice down. Neither of them want this conversation to be overheard, although for very different reasons.

"We have plenty of money, Brenda and I, and we'd sign any paperwork, any at all, to make clear that we wouldn't have the child lay claim as heir in any way whatsoever."

Steve believes him. Mr Benson's tux isn't just bespoke, but in this season's newest fashion, the lines of the lapels just a little sleeker, less flashy, than autumn's had been. Honey's been gossiping about fashion with Alex, and it's impossible not to pick up a few things, here and there.

"I realize my request could be construed in the worst possible light, especially after the most recent, the most recent—" Benson trails off, looking even more flustered, and Steve leaps into the conversational gap to save him.

"I admit, I'm more concerned than usual about security," Steve says, an understatement.

Mr Benson nods repeatedly like one of those doll heads on springs. "Yes, yes, and who wouldn't be, after such an outrageous—but, I hope you understand we would not wish to do anything that would risk—" He stops, tries again. "My wife and I would be absolutely flexible about locale, about any precautions you'd want to take, including cameras or bodyguards."

The words are spoken with such sincerity, Steve feels his heart sink.

Mr Benson looks down at the floor, speaks softly, almost to himself. "She was six months old, this time. When the doctors told us, I thought it couldn't be, not when we'd finally made it past the danger point, but…"

Oh God. Steve puts a hand on Benson's shoulder, turning his own body to shield the two of them from gossipy, prying eyes.

It takes some time before the man can compose himself, and he pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes shut, the way men in Steve's own time had done, to hide their tears, wiping at their face as if to scrub away their expression, not the betraying dampness of their humanity.

"Brenda's been a trouper through this whole ordeal, but this last time…" Mr Benson trails off again, voice gone bleak. "When we lost Emily, something broke."

Steve gives his shoulder a comforting squeeze. "I know you must get a lot of advice from strangers, but have you considered…"

Mr Benson laughs, shaky and humorless. "Yes. Whatever it is, we've tried it."

Steve bites his lip. He knows how things worked in his own time, but not now.

Before Steve can figure out how to word his question, Mr Benson goes on. "I know you're going to ask about adoption, but we tried that. The mother gave birth, and when she saw her baby, she changed her mind."

Steve can't blame the mother, but Benson's face had been washed with another shadow of grief.

"Captain, I know this is an imposition, that by all rights, I should go through an agency to even ask this, but—"

Steve nods slowly. "You love your wife."

Mr Benson looks up. "I love my wife."

Steve shouldn't have let the man keep talking, he should have said no immediately, he should have kept saying no. "Aren't there any others?"

"Certainly. The royal family in England are now expecting their third child due to the Earl of Rutland kindly lending them his."

"Oh," Steve says.

Silence stretches between them.

Steve remembers the beautiful charts from his books, each entry carefully annotated with research. The Roanokes are in a class on their own, in this.

Behind them, from the ballroom, a chime sounds, twice, and Steve jolts. Aw, hell. He needs to get going.

"Captain," Mr Benson says, clearly recognizing that Steve's about ready to retreat in the face of fire. "I'm not asking for any sort of commitment or, or even agreement, I know as alpha

you must have an endless number of demands for his attentions. All I'm asking is for you to think about it. Just think about it. If not for my sake, then for my wife's."

Before Steve can answer, Mr Benson closes his eyes, braces himself, looks up, meets Steve's gaze squarely. "Please."

Aw, double hell.

"You have my word that I'll consider your request." It's the best he can do. Far more than he *should* do. "Now, I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I have to see a lady about a dance."

*

Honey's hanging out next to a table of old guys, her beautiful gown sparkling with silver sequins in the ballroom's softer lights. "Hey, big guy. Funny meeting you here."

Steve smiles at her, glad to see one kind face in this crazy crowd of rich folk.

Then her face changes, her eyes darkening with concern. "Someone made you sad. What happened?"

But the band is stirring, getting ready, and Steve doesn't recognize the music. "What dance is this?"

"Tango," Honey says automatically. She steps close, puts one hand on his shoulder, offers her other.

"I don't know the Tango," Steve whispers. This is straight from his nightmare files. The only thing different from the dreamscape is that he's still wearing pants.

For now, anyway.

In most of these dreams, his pants vanish during the dance, scared away when the people in the audience start pointing and laughing at his stumbling steps.

"I do," Honey assures him, giving one of the gossipy old ladies a bit of a look, while smiling bright enough to show her perfect white teeth.

Uh oh.

"Hateful old bitch," Honey mutters, but gestures with her free hand again. "Come on, just hang on to me, and move with me. It'll be fine."

Oh God.

The lights are dimming around the room.

And now there's a spotlight shining right on them.

Steve wishes, briefly, for death.

"This benefits the Veteran's medical fund, we're not in war-torn France, we're in New York," she reminds him, unhelpfully.

Steve knows this already. It's why he hasn't yet given in to the urge to run for the pretty red Exit sign at the back of the ballroom. Tony would find a way to help him, damn it.

Well.

No.

Tony would probably snicker helplessly.

"I don't know the Tango," Steve says, possibly for the third or tenth time. He's lost track already, washed in icy fear sweat he hasn't suffered since his stage days.

"Yes, but *I do*," Honey says, and it's that comforting nagging mom voice, warm and familiar.

"It's the Tango," Steve can't help pointing out, trying not to be difficult, but really. "It's not like you can just chant 1-2-3, like the waltz."

Honey guffaws, loud and dismissive, to the startlement of the disapproving old ladies. "Like I'd ever do anything so tacky. No one's ever taught you to dance properly."

"Bucky did. He taught me to rhumba and foxtrot."

"He taught you to move according to a set structure of music," Honey says sternly. Then adds, "Poor dude."

"Hey! Bucky was great!"

"He must have had the patience of Francis," Honey says indulgently. "But that's a really tough way to dance. In that method, you train your body to follow the pattern, again and again, but once you've got it, you're in. It's just that it takes a long time. And kind of drives the teacher nuts."

"Well," Steve says, uneasily. "I was a terrible student."

"Nah. Anyway, that's not what we're gonna do. Tony says you and Tasha spar a lot."

"Sure," Steve says, caught off guard.

"Does she tell you what she's gonna do before you start?"

Steve laughs at the very idea. "No."

Honey beams at him, like he's finally done his multiplication tables properly. "Exactly. When you spar, do you lose a lot?"

"Not—really. We're pretty evenly matched. We can go a while before one of us loses or wins."

"There you go. Come on, let's get into position." Honey steps in far closer than Steve's used to, and she moves his arms around bodily. He lets her, bemused, as she arranges their bodies facing each other, just a breath apart, with their arms at odd angles. Even the hand clasp is different.

"Don't worry about time," Honey says, reading his expression. "I signaled the guys—they'll go through the intro music another two times for us."

Steve hadn't even noticed her signaling, but he believes her.

"Now, you close your eyes a sec."

Steve obeys, hoping that she's not heading where he thinks she's heading.

But she is.

He feels her leg move, and he jerks himself still, to her huff of disapproval.

"Big guy, your body has good instincts. You gotta let it run the show, like when you spar, OK? Just let go, and let it move how it feels like it."

This is going to be a disaster.

They've stumbled around just one single circuit of the tables, shuffling to the music, with the spotlight blessedly off, when Steve feels the heat of it land on him again.

"Oh fuck, I told them two rounds of the intros, those fuck bastards," he hears her mutter, but it's too late to do anything about it now.

"Maybe you should count the time—"

"No," she says, voice steely. "*No*, big guy. That's the old way. You'll be fine. I won't let you fall. You keep your eyes shut and listen with all you've got. That's your job, just listen, and I won't let you fall."

Oh God. In another second, the crowd will start laughing, and his pants will vanish, and everyone will see his darned mismatched socks, and it'll turn out to be broadcast live, too, and--

But Honey's still talking. "The Tango's not a dance, it's an argument, a fight, a lover's quarrel. Sometimes it's two old married folks arguing about custody of the kids, sometimes it's a pair of kids fighting about him looking at another girl, sometimes it's star-crossed lovers arguing whether to give in to passion."

Against his own better judgement, Steve's imagination is caught, and his body steps almost absently, his feet following hers across the floor as she paints a portrait of lovers, fighting the same fights they're always fought. To stay, to go, to give in, to give up, to hold fast.

Honey backs away, slinking, and Steve follows her, listening to her words more than the beat, letting his new body have its head, the way he does in a fight.

At first, the music is only at the edge of his consciousness, a Latin rhythm with strings haunting on top, but then Honey hesitates, less than a breath of a second, and instead of retreating, steps in for an almost-attack, shifting the argument from her previous retreating defense to an offense, and Steve pivots his hips, sliding one leg to the side to shift the balance, the same way he'd do with Natasha, and—

Suddenly, they're *dancing*.

The energy flows between them, sometimes retreat, sometimes approach, sometimes flight, sometimes fight, but as the music swells louder and the spotlight warms his muscles, Steve slowly opens his eyes.

Honey's eyes are lively and clear, her cheerful warm-meadow roadside scent rising, and Steve is smiling back at her without any conscious thought.

It seems the easiest thing in the world to twirl her out, draw her back in, rest his hand in the small of her back as she bends backwards, spine arched and leg pointed.

The movements are no longer distinctly his or hers, but as she'd said, a conversation, an argument, a back-and-forth.

All too soon, the music builds and builds, and Steve sends her out with the farthest reach of his arm, pulls her back close, lifts her, spins, and they're—done, her body curved over his arm, throat exposed, chest bared, and his own body curved protectively over her.

The burst of applause is as startling as a gunshot.

*

Steve flinches as someone else in the receiving line snaps a flash photo. The lights keep going off. Even this fancy new body can't keep up, and he's half-blind, holding out a hand to shake, stuck on automatic, agreeing to selfie after selfie, smiling for the cameras and trying not to wince as the bright lights feel more and more like flash-powder bangs.

*

By the time he steps off the elevator at home, Steve is exhausted, the high from the dance gone entirely.

Tony's sitting on the floor, hunched over something mechanical, pieces of metal and gears and tools scattered around him like flowers in a meadow. His shoulders are tense, the muscles sharply defined as he twists his wrench.

Steve glances around, but there's no Alex. He hopes the two haven't argued. Again.

For the first couple of days, the two omegas had been practically entwined, but two days ago, something happened. They've been oddly stiff and prickly since, snapping and snarling, off-kilter and disgruntled as a pair of wet cats.

It gives Steve a headache.

"Hey, gorgeous," Tony says now. "Pull up a patch of carpet and tell me all about it."

Steve obeys, sitting nearby. Watching his mate work is soothing, and so is finishing off the glass of brandy next to the tool chest, the liquor a warm glow down his throat.

After a while, the machine in Tony's hands starts to take shape. This is part of a much larger engine, and some of the pieces are new, sharp with oil and tiny slivers of metal from being newly made.

"What is it?" Steve asks, curious. With Tony, the possibilities are endless and fascinating. Yesterday, he'd been re-working a fishing boat's net mechanism, to the endless bitching of Clint, who complained that the living room reeked of tuna gone off.

"Combine," Tony says, holding up one piece to peer inside it, like he's a jeweler looking for flaws in a diamond. After glancing at Steve's puzzled face, he laughs and says, "It's part of a combine harvester. They're farm machines."

"Oh, a *combine*," Steve says. He knows what a combine is, but without context, the word is a little baffling, even though Tony'd said it a little differently than usual. "Sure."

They sit together for a while longer, not speaking, just comfortable, and Steve's feeling relaxed at last, eyes half closed.

Tony tosses a couple tools into his metal toolbox, and Steve's eyes snap open.

"We're having the dinner tomorrow night," Tony says, not looking up, focused on putting things away. His work spaces often look chaotic, but Steve's learned that it's just an illusion most of the time. Tony takes good care of his tools, and he puts things back when he's done —they're just in his own order, which can look like chance to the 'mechanically ignorant mind of the everyday moron', as he puts it.

"What dinner?" Steve asks absently. Is that a Hello Kitty washcloth? It is. Tony is using a Hello Kitty washcloth as his grease rag this week.

"*The* dinner."

Steve sits up. "Wait—you mean the grace dinner?"

"Were you planning any other formal dinner parties?"

"No, but—" Steve stops, gathers himself. "Tony, is this what you and Alex have been arguing about? I don't want him to feel pressured to do this. It's a gift we've offered lovingly and you're *both* welcome to decline."

This gets him a long intense stare, full on eye contact, a dominance play most full alphas aren't capable of with Steve. "Alex is fully capable of being a stubborn idiot to me without the need of an excuse."

All righty, then.

Steve drops the subject and asks instead about Tony's other projects—the latest upgrades for SI's cell phones and the redesign of an energy cell.

And then it's bedtime.

Despite his exhaustion, Steve feels an upsurge of joy when Tony kisses him on the cheek.

That absent and affectionate kiss carries him all the way to his bedroom, and he falls asleep, smiling like a big dope.

Chapter End Notes

Guess what, folks?

There will actually be more tomorrow.

beams at you all

I'm very sorry for the long delay!!!!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!